

Chaire Bell



KA9ESAMA
เขียน

กรร็ดร้อง
ผู้ช่วยนักเขียน

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Synopsis:

The story follows Bell Lalita, who is sentenced to 15 months in prison for possession of drugs that do not belong to her. However, given the evidence, her lawyer argues that even if she fights the charges in court, she has no chance of winning. Reluctantly, she gives in and accepts the sentence. Upon entering prison, she becomes the target of an influential group that the board simply turns a blind eye to. With no other options, she seeks refuge with a solitary confinement inmate named Claire, whom no one dares to interact with due to rumors of a brutal murder charge. As they grow closer, Bell realizes there is kindness in Claire. In turn, Claire learns to empathize with others through Bell. Gradually, love begins to form between the two, even as they face increasing challenges both within the prison and from the outside world, which has not been completely cut off.



Chapter 1

Storm

"Bell Lalita."

The tired and bored voice called out a name, reading from the rough documents in his hands. His drooping eyelids, marked by age, peered through the lenses of his glasses at the pretty girl sitting in front of him. Her fair, smooth skin, rosy cheeks—as if she took care of her complexion daily—and thin, naturally red lips, even without lipstick, suggested impeccable health.

However, her expression made it clear that the chair she was sitting on, and the place she was about to go, were anything but pleasant.

She possessed all the features that matched conventional beauty standards. Anyone who saw her would have believed she was destined for the entertainment world.

But fate had taken a completely different path.

"What did you do?"

A man in his fifties asked, even though the answer was already written on the paper in front of him. He wasn't a talent scout or modeling agent looking for fresh faces. His tone hadn't been friendly from the start, and his civil servant uniform made it clear what his role was in this place.

"Possession of drugs."



"What kind? For personal use or for sale?"

While the girl barely dared to look up to meet his gaze, speaking in a voice that was barely audible, the officer responded in a neutral tone—he had dealt with hundreds of similar cases. As long as she didn't cry desperately, repeating phrases like *"I didn't do it, I'm not to blame,"* he didn't need to waste time comforting her.

"Yeah... Ice or 'Methamphetamine'. But—"

The older man shook his head like a weary disciplinarian, clearly exhausted from dealing with countless cases like hers.

"Haven't young people today stopped believing that 'ice' can make them more beautiful or give them lighter skin? How many times are you going to fall for that?" He looked at the girl through his glasses again, as if confirming his belief that the drug did nothing to enhance appearance.

"You're already so pretty, and you still resort to drugs?" he added, shaking his head slightly in disdain. She wasn't the first offender he'd seen, and there were hundreds of female prisoners who got involved with drugs simply because they believed the supposed benefits outweighed the harm.

"Have you ever been arrested before?"

"No."

"You're going to waste your time. You're going to waste your future. Was it worth it?" The officer continued, now sounding more like a disillusioned counselor—or perhaps it was more accurate to say he was simply scolding her.

"Do you smoke?"



Lalita shook her head. She knew that no matter what she said at that moment, it wouldn't make much difference.

The man in front of her was just a government official, not a lawyer. He wasn't there to help anyone—just to screen each prisoner before sending them to the women's prison.

"Is there anyone waiting outside? Boyfriend, husband, children, parents, siblings?"

"I have a boyfriend. We're not married yet. My mother passed away when I was a child, and my father died last year," she answered—truthfully—not because she still grieved a life she'd barely had time to live, but in a restrained, forced voice.

"Is anyone waiting outside?"

The question was almost insignificant, but she had to suppress the true answer deep in her heart, comforting herself silently with hopeful words that everything would be fine.

"Men don't wait, believe me. I'm a man, so I know. Especially with a drug charge... wow." The officer spoke like someone familiar with the road ahead of her.

He shook his head again, already imagining how the girl in front of him would be abandoned. The more he saw that she didn't argue or react, the more he kept pressing the same point.

"Look, the sentence is short. It's your first offense, and you confessed, right? Fifteen months. If he really loves you, he'll wait."



"Yes, thank you." Lalita took a deep breath, telling herself that everything would be fine soon. She had no doubt that her boyfriend would contact a lawyer to appeal to the court, claim her innocence, and fulfill his promise to get her out of jail.

Even though, deep down, she had doubts and worries, she had no choice but to trust him.

"You can go now. Don't forget to grab your pillow, blanket, soap, toothpaste, and tissues. You can buy the rest inside."

The officer gestured, discreetly noticing the tears almost brimming in her eyes. Maybe he didn't want to waste time comforting inmates—or maybe he had simply finished the screening questions before sending her to her cell.

Lalita stood up, the chair creaking against the floor. Her slender body was dressed in a dull green shirt, one size too big, and matching pants tied tightly at the waist. The prison uniform was something she would have to get used to for a month or two... or maybe longer, depending on the skill of her boyfriend's family lawyer, who insisted he could get her out for sure.

Of course, he wasn't someone who would ever end up in a situation like hers.

About a week earlier, in a nightclub packed with patrons, the atmosphere was more than just lively and fun—it was nearly chaotic. It wasn't only the alcohol that fueled the vibe, but also drugs that heightened emotions and energy. Still, no one was aware enough to stop anything. Even the club owners turned a blind eye.



Especially the sweet smell of special e-cigarette liquids, which spread everywhere. Everywhere you looked, people were exhaling clouds of smoke through their noses and mouths, sharing second-hand nicotine with everyone around them.

Not that Lalita wasn't used to bars and nightclubs. She had been going out with friends—like many in her social circle—since her college days. She rarely missed an invitation for a night out. However, visiting this secret club in the Thonglor district shifted her perspective on certain groups of people.

The clientele of this establishment were, at the very least, guests of influential figures in the country: children of politicians, heirs of business tycoons, even actors and celebrities she recognized from TV and film. Still, Lalita didn't see much difference from other clubs... or maybe the difference was that everyone here could indulge in illegal activities without ever worrying about the legal consequences.

She glanced at her boyfriend sitting next to her, but he seemed distant. He was engrossed in a lively conversation about cryptocurrency trading with his friends, holding an e-cigarette in one hand and an alcoholic drink in the other.

Top was the only son of a politician from the ruling party, whose popularity with the public wasn't exactly high. Still, by staying loyal and avoiding conflict, his family enjoyed a comfortable life, thanks to the privileges handed down from their superiors. That comfort extended to Lalita as well. She had chosen to turn a blind eye to the social criticism directed at the government, focusing only on what she received from her boyfriend: care, attention, and a lifestyle that mirrored his own.



Sometimes Lalita disagreed with Top's actions and tried to warn him. If he didn't listen, she would simply choose to ignore him.

Until...

"Police!"

Lalita vividly remembered the moment chaos erupted. Before anyone could react, there were screams of surprise and the sharp sound of glasses falling and shattering. Then, the lights in the club suddenly switched on, blinding eyes that had grown used to the dark. No one had expected the police to dare raid the "tiger's den"—a place where guests were carefully screened and only special individuals were allowed entry. Why would the establishment allow the police in so easily?

Top threw his e-cigarette to the ground and rushed to his beloved's side, trembling as if he were afraid of being caught in something serious.

Another thing about Top: as the only son in his family, he was under his father's almost complete control. Although he occasionally strayed from the expected path, he usually acted cautiously and in secret, so as not to bring trouble to his father—a public figure and politician. This time was no different.

At least ten police officers stormed into the club, splitting into male and female teams to search the patrons. Some guests were quickly taken aside as suspects, while others shouted about their legal rights—shouts that were ignored by the officers.

On some tables, there were piles of drug powder mixed with glasses of alcohol, and electronic cigarettes scattered everywhere, belonging to no one in particular.



"Excuse me, we're going to search you."

Lalita consented as the police officer began frisking her, hands moving over her body to check for anything illegal. She had a clear conscience—she had done nothing wrong except drink alcohol. She had never smoked e-cigarettes. The girl glanced at her boyfriend, who was being searched by a plainclothes officer. Top's face was pale, almost feverish, and he looked drunk, though still able to stand.

However, Lalita had to shift her attention back to herself when the policewoman's hands moved to her waist. Something round and protruding was in the pocket of her linen jeans. The officer took the opportunity to pull the object out.

Then, she held it up for everyone to see: a packet of white crystalline powder, unmistakably similar to methamphetamine—ice.

Her heart sank.

"According to the Penal Code on crimes of drug possession for personal use, even without evidence of previous use or intent to traffic, the chances of winning the case are still very low."

The amount of methamphetamine found in Lalita's possession exceeded the legal limit.

After the raid and search of the Thonglor nightclub, more than twenty patrons were taken to the police station. Of course, Lalita was one of them—charged with drug possession, and with an amount that disqualified her from receiving a reduced sentence.

Although she insisted on her innocence, claiming the drugs weren't hers and that she didn't know how they had ended up in her pocket, the situation looked grim.



However, one hundred percent of the people—whether users or dealers—denied the accusations with the same phrase. Faced with the choice between the weight of words and concrete evidence, the police chose to believe the latter.

“What about Top? Didn’t he come?” Lalita asked, looking over the shoulder of the lawyer whom Top had sent to help her right after her arrest.

After being separated from the others due to the discovery of drugs in her possession, Lalita had been unable to contact anyone or use her phone. The last time she saw her boyfriend was when he looked at her in shock, barely able to cope with the situation. Before she could say anything, he was taken away.

“Mr. Top has not been charged with anything. He is resting at home now.”

Lalita hadn’t expected that response from the lawyer. Her mental state was shaken, and she was so agitated she could hardly believe she was facing something she had never imagined.

Just the thought of being searched and found with drugs that weren’t hers was bad enough—enough to make her want someone, anyone, by her side.

She didn’t even want to think about how much worse it would be if her parents were still alive to learn that their daughter had been arrested for drug possession.

“Don’t worry. Mr. Top couldn’t come because the situation here is chaotic. Journalists are all over the police station, and the news has already spread about the police raiding a nightclub full of celebrities, actors, politicians’ children, and rich people. Some were caught with drugs, either for use or sale... He’s afraid that if he comes here, he might be dragged into the headlines and harmed.”



Lalita's eyes burned, and her hands were sweating. She hadn't been able to close her eyes all night since she was taken. Though she knew many hours had passed, she wasn't sure if it was daylight outside or when she would be released. What she did know was that the man who claimed to love her—the man she'd been with for years—didn't want to get involved in any kind of trouble.

Because of his politician father... and yet, he hadn't gotten in touch. Not even a single message. Not yet.

"Let me explain," the lawyer began. "With the amount of drugs exceeding the legal limit, the police can charge you with small-scale trafficking. Even if your bank account shows no suspicious transactions, that doesn't exonerate you. You could still face a harsher penalty than simple possession for personal use."

"But I never got involved with drugs. I never used..." Lalita protested.

"This might help reduce the sentence," the lawyer said matter-of-factly. "Since it's your first offense, even if you go to jail, it won't be for long."

He spoke with the ease of someone explaining how to enroll a child in school, confident that everything would work out and someone would be there to pick her up at the end of the day.

But for Lalita, the word *prison* hit like a collapsing world. A fist-sized lump rose in her throat, and her dry lips could no longer form words.

"I'll repeat what I said before: if you decide to fight the charges in court, your chances of winning are less than 50%. And if you lose, the penalty will be more severe than if you confess from the beginning. I suggest you think about this carefully."



"But those drugs aren't mine! Why don't you investigate...?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"Your claim is not based on evidence. The drugs were with you, Bell. We can't go back in time to see who put them there. Mr. Top asked me to tell you that he will do his best to help you get out of this as soon as possible. If you confess and cooperate, the court may reduce your sentence. In that case, Mr. Top and I will be here to help you. Trust me."

"Breakfast is at six, lunch is at eleven, and dinner is at three in the afternoon. If you're more than ten minutes late, the kitchen will be closed. You have ten minutes to shower in the evening after dinner. Don't slouch like you would at home. Here, you must follow the rules strictly, obey the guards' orders, and avoid trouble with others—unless you want to be sent to solitary confinement."

As she walked behind a prison guard toward her sleeping cell, Lalita carried a thick, factory-smelling down blanket, a small, hard pillow, and a plastic bag filled with personal items, including a toothbrush, toothpaste, and soap. After going through a screening process and being questioned extensively, she watched an educational video about the dangers of drugs. It might have been useful for elementary school students in a health class, but not for an inmate about to be taken to prison.

Lalita clasped her arms as she walked through a curved door that led into a narrow hallway. She hadn't seen any prisoners since entering the prison area, but soon she heard voices coming from the hallway. Massive iron doors separated the inmates from freedom, but at least there were bars with enough openings to let in light. A few women craned their necks to see the new inmate passing by.



"Each cell accommodates two people. There are specific times for meals, bathing, and evening activities. After that, there will be an attendance check in each cell. Don't miss it, understand?"

"Yes," Lalita replied. Although she was not shy, being the center of attention, with people intentionally looking through the bars, made her a little uncomfortable.

To be honest, Lalita wasn't ready to be in that place. But she had no choice, and no one could help her at that moment. She tried to think that she would have to adapt to the new environment, even though it was very different from moving to a new school or house, where new friends could welcome her with open arms.

Ever since she entered prison, Lalita had told herself that as long as she found people she could live with—who were not violent criminals or murderers—that would be enough. She was relieved to discover that the wing she was in was for inmates convicted of common crimes, not dangerous criminals, as she had initially feared.

"Don't look at others."

"Your cell is here. Come in. Lunch is at eleven."

The officer gave the final instructions before unlocking the cell door. A loud creak echoed as the rusty iron door swung open. Lalita took a deep breath, as if there were no more air left for her to breathe on the other side of the wall.

Her slender body crossed the threshold, and the first thing she saw was a bunk bed, where a young woman had already occupied the bottom bunk. The other person seemed to know that she would have a new cellmate today.



"Hi, my name is Kaew."

She introduced herself in a cheerful voice, unlike almost everyone Lalita had met so far. Kaew was short, standing at less than 5'3", and her face looked younger than her age, almost like a high school student who shouldn't be here. Lalita, still feeling out of place, glanced toward the door.

Behind her, the door closed firmly before the guard locked the cell, preventing any inmates from escaping. Before Lalita could introduce herself, Kaew approached, offering to help carry the pillow and blanket Lalita had carried the entire way.

"Come, I'll help. If you don't make the bed quickly, they'll call for lunch soon."

"Oh, yes... Thank you," Lalita said shyly, looking around the room. In addition to the bunk bed, there was a small table with only one chair, a floor fan, a clothes hanger, and a plastic drawer full of duct tape patches, indicating that it had passed through several hands. At least there was a small, barred window near the desk, allowing air to circulate and keeping the room from getting too stuffy, even though it was too high up to see outside.

"Is this your first day? What was your crime?" Kaew, the shorter girl, asked as she helped put the blanket on the top bunk.

She looked at her new cellmate, who hesitated to answer, and smiled broadly, trying to make her feel more at ease. "You can talk, no problem. We're all equal here. I, for example, am arrested for murder and dismemberment of a body, which I threw in the toilet."

"What?!"



Kaew laughed at the look of shock and disbelief on Lalita's face before quickly denying it. "Just kidding! I was a soap opera actress before, but someone invited me to invest in an online gambling site. The money was good, so I ended up inviting others to join as well. It was a chain of invitations. Who would say no?"

"It seemed like a good opportunity, but when the police started investigating, they didn't go after the big fish. Instead, they went after people like us—people who have some name but not enough to avoid arrest. That way, the police get to make headlines and show results."

Kaew shrugged, as if she had already accepted that the legal system is not always fair to all social classes. For some people, all they need is a loophole and the power to influence things to continue living freely in society, without consequences.

"But in my case, I confessed and cooperated with the police, helping with the investigation. That's why the court sentenced me to just two years and a bit. If I behave well, I might get out even sooner."

In addition to her kindness, which was the first thing Lalita noticed about her short cellmate, Kaew also had an optimistic outlook on life.

Lalita admitted that, in a situation like this—inside a cell so tight—it would be difficult to find something positive, but Kaew managed.

"My name is Bell. I'm here for drug possession."

"Seriously? Is that true? You're not joking, are you?" Kaew's wide eyes stared at Lalita with more disbelief than when she was lied to about the murder and dismemberment.



"That's true, but the drugs weren't mine. I was framed, I don't know by whom, and I can't find out... My boyfriend brought a lawyer to help, but he said the evidence is too strong. If I fight in court, I'll probably lose and end up in jail anyway. So, I ended up here."

From the police to the prison warden, no one cared to listen to what she had to say. Or even if they did, in the end, the legal evidence was overwhelming. For the first time, someone was actually listening to her with an open heart. Kaew had a soft expression, her eyebrows drooping and her smile disappearing, showing genuine empathy.

"That's not right. Why did you have such bad luck...?"

Lalita began to think how lucky she was to find a cellmate of the same age, in such a humiliating place, where she didn't know what else she would face during the long time she would have to spend there.

Everyone had to leave their cells and walk to the cafeteria, located across the central courtyard. The morning sun was bright, shining down on the dry grass. The two cellmates walked side by side under the shade of a curved roof. Lalita, or Bell, as she allowed Kaew to call her, looked around the courtyard, which superficially resembled that of an elementary school. She took a deep breath of the fresh air, relishing the chance to be outdoors again.

"See that little parking-lot-looking building over there?" Kaew pointed to a building across the courtyard, connected to the main building but which seemed to be avoided by everyone. The windows, which should have been open like the ones in their cells, were completely closed, as if they didn't want anyone living inside to see the light of day.



"That's the solitary confinement area. That's where they put those who fight or attack the guards. Last week, someone was sent there, and after just three days, he nearly went insane." Kaew whispered, as if it were a topic that shouldn't be discussed.

Bell nodded. Even normal cells, where two people slept, were cramped and suffocating. A solitary confinement cell, with closed windows and completely dark, where you don't know if it's day or night, would certainly make anyone lose their sanity.

But before Bell could turn her attention back to the path, she noticed a prisoner walking across the lawn toward... a vegetable garden? From what she could see, bricks surrounded mounds of dirt with green plants growing in small beds. Bell looked around, expecting a guard to call the prisoner out for stepping out of line or for someone to question why she was going to the vegetable garden at lunchtime. But no... Everyone acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary, continuing to walk in a line toward the cafeteria.

Bell almost stopped to watch. The inmate crouched over the garden, as if she was doing something Bell couldn't see clearly. Before she could continue looking, Kaew tapped her shoulder, warning her to move on, as they had almost lost the group when other people passed by them.

The prison cafeteria was a bit stuffy in the midday sun. Most of the ceiling fans were weak after years of use, offering little relief from the heat.

Bell was about to pick up a stainless steel tray that reminded her of her school days during lunch. But before she could continue in line to get her food, Kaew suddenly looked alarmed, as if she had remembered something important.



"I forgot to get the soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce! Oh no, there are eggs today!"

Bell didn't understand why this was so important, but Kaew seemed so worried that she decided to go back and get the condiments. Before she went, she said, "Save me a seat, any seat that's free. I'll be back soon!"

Kaew then walked against the flow of people who were getting in line for lunch. Bell watched her new friend's small back until she disappeared from view, before turning her attention back to the advancing line.

When she stopped in front of the cook, who had a serious and unwelcoming expression, Bell noticed that she was also wearing the green prison uniform, but with an apron tied around her waist and a white hat covering her hair to keep it from falling into the food. She understood that some positions within the prison were filled by inmates who volunteered for these roles, such as cooks and cleaners. After all, if they didn't do it, who would? The employees were few.

"Pass the tray. Would you like rice?"

Bell hadn't expected everyone there to be kind, but hearing such blunt and inconsiderate words wasn't easy to deal with right away. Still, she understood why Kaew had gone back to get the soy sauce and ketchup: they were essential for seasoning the food.

When she received her first meal in prison, Bell was greeted with a vegetable soup that looked more like a soggy cabbage broth. There was no tofu, chicken, or ground beef—just a small boiled egg. She couldn't expect a balanced meal; the goal was simply to fill her stomach until dinner, if that would be enough.



Lalita looked at the cook, who was about to serve the soup to the next person in line.

"Is that all?"

"What do you want, a feast? Do you want me to order you a pizza? Go away, there are people in line." The cook almost threw the ladle at Bell, who dared to ask for more food, followed by mocking laughter and sidelong glances from other inmates, finding her strange.

Bell pursed her lips and reluctantly lowered her head, looking for an empty seat in the cafeteria.

It seemed that the incident with the cook had been witnessed by many people, and they all glanced at Bell sideways, quickly stretching out their arms and placing their hands on the empty chairs beside them, as if they didn't want the newbie to sit with them. Bell walked past several tables until she was almost at the end of the cafeteria, where she finally found an empty table to place her stainless steel tray. She sat down, hoping Kaew would come back soon.

Before she could take the first bite of her food, someone placed a tray next to her with a loud thud, causing soup to splash onto the table. Just as Bell was about to turn around to see if it was Kaew, despite her aggressive demeanor, another person walked around the table and sat down across from her.

It was clear that it wasn't Kaew.

Bell looked at the woman who had just sat down across from her. The wrinkles around her eyes, the dark spots on her skin and cheeks, indicated that she was older. One thing Bell could tell, even before any conversation, was that they weren't there to make friends.



"On the first day, you can't sit at the table. You have to sit on the floor in front of the kitchen. Didn't anyone tell you?"

The voice was authoritative, full of power, even though her face didn't show whether she was serious or just joking. Bell felt nervous, stirring the rice with her spoon, trying to stay calm and waiting for someone to tell her it was just a test. But then...

"CRASHHH!"

"P'Dao already spoke, and you still haven't gone?"

Bell's tray was pushed over, causing more than half of the soup to spill out. The spoon she was holding fell to the floor, and so did her heart, which seemed to drop all the way to her feet. Bell prayed that Kaew would either return to the cafeteria and help her out of this situation or explain to the group that she knew nothing.

"I saw you walking with that Kaew. Where did she go?" The woman on the right gave a sarcastic smile while looking around in search of the person mentioned.

"[...] Be careful if you get too close to that Kaew. She likes to take advantage of women. You might end up being harassed without realizing it."

"Isn't she a lesbian? But she's not a 'Tom' (a male lesbian), so Kaew won't want it."

"Oh, 'Toms' are rare in prison. If it's a woman, she'll go after anyone. She even hit on you for a while, remember?"



"Then let's stop talking about Kaew and not waste time with this one. Let her eat in peace." It was no surprise that the other two fell silent, even without finishing their discussion. The voice of the woman named P'Dao did not show anger, but it was as if a boss had interrupted a presentation in a meeting, leaving the room in total silence, where only breathing could be heard.

"So what's it going to be? You're not up yet?" The hard gaze turned to the new inmate who had been brought into the prison that morning. Bell pressed her lips together so tightly that it started to hurt. She wanted to wait for Kaew, but from what she heard in the conversation, Kaew might not be able to handle these three alone. This meant that Bell was being... bullied by an influential group in the prison.

"Is she listening? Is she deaf?" The girl on the right chuckled softly, clapping her hands near Bell's ear, making her flinch and look away. "So you heard her. Get up quickly, or we'll need someone to 'invite' her."

Without further ado, one of the women grabbed Bell's thin arm and pulled her up. But Bell resisted, not wanting to give in easily, as the guard who had initially brought her in had not mentioned anything about rules regarding where to sit or eat, other than arriving at the cafeteria at the designated time.

"She doesn't want to go, P'Dao."

"There are no guards or rules telling newbies where to sit. So anyone can sit at the table, right?" Bell didn't want to cause trouble on her first day in prison, but she also didn't want to give in to everything. However, her courage seemed a little out of place, as if she were poking a tiger.



"Eat!"

The tug moved from her arm to the hair on the back of her head, forcing Bell to look up at the ceiling. Both of her hands tried to free the fingers of the person holding her hair, as tears filled her eyes from pain and surprise.

"Talk to us properly. Apologize to P'Dao."

"Let go..."

"Apologize to us now. Bow at the feet of P'Dao." One of the subordinates in the group of three emphasized each word as she pulled Bell's hair harder. Bell had to bend over to reduce the tension on her scalp and avoid further pain.

Would prison guards intervene if they saw inmates fighting in the cafeteria? Or would they let it go, since no one was seriously injured or in immediate danger?

Would anyone come to help her? Kaew hadn't come back yet...

Tears blurred Bell's vision, causing her to see everything in a distorted way.

Everything seemed blurry except for the three women surrounding her and intimidating her. But then someone else appeared, placing a stainless steel tray on the table and calmly sitting in the empty seat, as if nothing was happening.

The pressure on Bell's hair eased, allowing her to sit down again. She noticed the confused expression of the middle-aged woman named P'Dao, who had previously ordered the newbie to sit on the ground. Her attitude changed completely.



Bell looked away at the new person who had arrived. She seemed to be only a few years older than Bell, definitely not of the same generation as Dao, who was probably over forty. However, her presence made the three women uncomfortable, with no further insults or intimidation directed at Bell.

Furthermore, the new person began to eat calmly, as if she was completely oblivious to the world around her. Her sharp, expressionless eyes were fixed on the soup, searching for any piece of ground meat that should be there.

"Go sit somewhere else." Finally, Dao decided to retreat, preferring not to sit at the table with someone who seemed indifferent to the chaos around her. The two subordinates, seeing their leader get up and change places, followed her without question.

Bell couldn't help but be surprised by what had just happened. She looked at the woman who had made the three of them retreat, unsure whether she had come to help on purpose or just by chance. Regardless of the reason, Bell wanted to thank her.

But it seemed that she had looked at the other person for too long. Her impassive face, almost numb, as if the food hadn't tasted very good, rose from the tray. Their eyes met for a moment, until someone realized they were being watched. It was then that the other person did something that made Bell even more curious about where this woman had come from.

She pointed to Bell's tray, where soup had spilled all over the table and the boiled egg was lying on its side. Before Bell could wonder what was going on, the woman spoke:

"If you're not going to eat the yolk, can I have it?"



"Just the yolk, I don't want the white. But if you don't want to give it, that's fine."

“ ... ”



Chapter 2

Nineteen Stab Wounds

"It was her! The woman who broke into a school and killed a teacher just to steal a computer!"

"According to reports, she stabbed the victim more than ten times. The body was riddled with wounds, soaked in blood."

"It's a good thing it happened after school hours, when the students had already left. Otherwise, I don't even want to imagine..."

However, **Claire-Krapat Kunthalak**, the accused in the murder case that shocked the country for a whole month, was sentenced under the Criminal Code as "bodily harm resulting in death" – something much less serious. Worse still, she confessed to the crime immediately after her arrest, without any resistance or attempt to escape. Furthermore, she cooperated fully with the police in drawing up the map that accompanied her confession. The defendant's sentence was therefore reduced even before she began serving her prison sentence.

From a life sentence, the court reduced it to just thirteen years. Yes... even though her crimes were so brutal and shocking that the public, upon learning of them, could not accept them. Debates and criticism arose, questioning how the country's laws could be so lenient. Where have you ever seen someone stab a victim to death with more than ten stabs and still be convicted of *bodily harm resulting in death*?



Earlier, a news agency had revealed the facts of the case: the cause of death, as certified by the coroner, was not excessive blood loss, even though the body—especially the chest and abdomen—was riddled with stab wounds. These wounds were, in fact, inflicted after the victim's death. The real cause of death was an extremely violent impact to the head, strong enough to fracture the skull and cause fatal brain damage.

Claire's name was mentioned, raising the question: why would she have stabbed the victim after his death? Some speculate that she may have developed an obsession with the act of killing, thus awakening a primal instinct in her subconscious—what they call a **psychopath**.

A serious personality disorder characterized by antisocial behavior and conflict with established norms. Individuals with this psychopathology often lack empathy, are unable to distinguish between right and wrong, and may even commit crimes in cold blood.

Impassive, as if she felt absolutely nothing, her face showed no emotion—not even a tremor or regret as the sentence was read. Claire was immediately branded by society as a psychopath, just like other cruel killers.

But it wasn't just the outside world that had its eyes on her. From the first day Claire stepped foot on prison grounds, it was clear that most murder inmates avoided getting involved with her—especially someone with a history as brutal as hers.

Except for one detail...

"It's you, Claire of the 19 stab wounds, isn't it?"



The nickname, earned for her sadistic behavior towards her victim, was always accompanied by her name. Claire looked up from the fifteen Baht comic she had taken from the shelf, staring at the person who had called her. Her sharp, penetrating gaze made her expression even more intimidating, but her eyes remained empty, impossible to decipher—as if nothing behind them revealed what she truly felt.

"They asked if it's you, so answer!" The voice was not just a hoarse and imposing threat, like someone boasting of their power, but was accompanied by the violent gesture of throwing the cheap comic book from the other person's hands to the floor. The act made the other inmates around them turn their curious eyes toward the scene. After all, this time, the target of the leader of the most feared faction in the women's prison—known for starting trouble with anyone—was none other than "Claire of the 19 Stabs" herself. It was hard to say who was crazier in that situation.

Her calloused, rough hand—evidence of years of hard work—picked up the comic book from the floor. Every scar and callus told the story of a life marked by violence and adversity, her once porcelain-white skin now sporting a golden tan, as if it had been kissed by the sun for too long. Claire drew herself up to her full, impressive height, facing her provocateur head-on. Her slender, athletic body—unusual by Thai female standards—was so striking that the aggressor involuntarily took a step back. A tense silence hung in the air as they assessed each other, each trying to predict the other's next move.

But then Claire simply picked up the old comic. The yellowed and dried pages bore witness to her many seasons of reading. When everyone expected a violent confrontation...

"I didn't even bookmark my page to know where I left off."



A heavy silence dominated the room for long seconds until those present understood the irony of the situation. The eyebrows that were initially furrowed in confusion relaxed into muffled laughter. With a fluid movement, Claire closed the comic book and tossed it back into her hands, before a thunderous voice roared:

"How old are you to be reading comics?"

Everyone knew that no one in their right mind wanted to get into trouble with the most powerful faction in the prison. When the group members picked on someone, most of the inmates would just swallow their words—it was the price to pay for a peaceful life behind bars. New girls, in particular, were often targeted from day one. If they could handle the teasing without fighting back, they were usually left alone after that.

But Claire — 19 Stabs, was not like the others.

One against three—or, in simpler language, one beating three.

The surrounding inmates formed a circle, watching to decide which side they would bet on. Even though she was outnumbered, Claire fought like a beast. Two women tried to immobilize her but were thrown away with a sharp blow. If it weren't for the other four or five henchmen who joined the fight, no one would have been able to stop her.

By the time the guards finally intervened to break up the fight, Claire was already covered in bruises: her face scarred with cuts, blood dripping from her eyebrows and mouth, her entire body as if she had just emerged from a boxing match. Even so, it took two guards to pull her away—she was still straddling one of the inmates, completely out of control.



In the end, it was hard to tell who was in worse shape: the woman Claire had nearly killed, or Claire herself, who could barely stand before being carried to the infirmary.

After the incident, Claire needed six stitches in her eyebrow and three more in her lip. Her face was swollen and bruised, but she was still lucky; no bones were broken badly enough to require surgery. As soon as she returned to prison, she was sent straight to solitary confinement: six days of confinement as punishment for being the initial aggressor.

However, her opponents suffered no consequences. None. Whether it was due to influence, corruption among the guards, or some other reason, they got away with it.

As for Bell's expression? It was clear that there was a lump in her throat when she heard the full story, told by someone who truly understood what had happened.

The woman who had been eating with her a moment ago and had even asked for the yolk of her egg was, in fact, a prisoner convicted of a heinous crime: the murder of a high school teacher, a case that had shocked the country the previous year. And that wasn't all. Her reputation as a "**one against three**" fighter, and for having resisted four or five people trying to restrain her, still echoed through the halls, even after almost a week in solitary confinement.

"It's not so surprising that these three have given up on picking on her." Bell recalled the tense moment when the bullies had backed down, simply because their former rival was sitting at the same table.



"Actually, that wasn't the only reason the Gang of Three gave up," Kaew added as the two of them settled down on a marble bench near the cafeteria.

Lunch time was over, and the inmates had some free time before the afternoon meeting in the auditorium. That's when Bell took the opportunity to ask about what she had just witnessed.

"Three-D?" Bell repeated the name, intrigued. Even though the name had nothing to do with 3D glasses for cinema, it was far from a common nickname for groups or gangs.

"Three-D comes from their names," Kaew explained. "The one with the short bob is called Dao. She's the oldest of the group—she's in her early forties, I think... She's also the one who's been here the longest, convicted of killing her own husband."

She paused dramatically before continuing: "According to the newspapers, the guy beat her. She even had a miscarriage after a beating. Until one day, she couldn't take it anymore, tied a rope around his neck, strangled him, and dragged his body to throw it in the stream behind the house."

Bell's eyes widened. "What the hell was that? How did she think they wouldn't find out?"

"Yeah," Kaew shrugged. "She was arrested three days later, as soon as they found her husband's body floating, of course."

Bell began to question whether she really wanted to hear such detailed biographies of the prisoners. *How lucky I was to have lunch before Kaew began describing macabre scenes so vivid they seemed to project themselves into my mind. In fact, I was doubly lucky—if I had eaten more, I would probably be sick by now.*



"The chubbiest one in the group is called Deuan. She went to prison right after the leader, and they were so close that they would die for each other." Kaew paused dramatically. "But her crime is... quite sad, actually."

"Why?"

Kaew took a deep breath, as if the story affected her personally. "She killed her own grandmother. But don't spread this, okay?"

Kaew lowered her voice, eyes scanning the surroundings to make sure no one was listening before continuing...

"Actually..." Kaew lowered her voice even further, "she took care of her grandmother, who was bedridden, by herself. The old woman couldn't move or do anything on her own. No other relatives came to help."

She paused, her fingers gripping the arm of the marble bench. "No one knows how long she held on. But when reporters came, Deuan said her grandmother kept saying, 'I want to die. I can't take it anymore. Why can't I die? This is torture.'"

"Then she picked up a pillow and..." Kaew didn't finish the sentence, but the hand gesture was enough.

The word "pity" popped into Bell's mind, even as her own neck still throbbed from the blow she had taken. The young woman sighed deeply, her eyes lost in a potted plant in front of her, her mind heavy with the story she had just heard. She had spent almost a year caring for her sick father, fighting a disease that doctors could only monitor the symptoms of, not cure. And even after that, he needed time to recover his mental health.



Bell looked down at her hands, knowing that her experience was nothing compared to that of caring for a bedridden patient for years. What had this person sacrificed? Physical health, sanity, and years that could have been spent in other ways—all consumed by constant care.

"And the last one in the group? She must be around my age, right?" She changed the subject abruptly, trying to push away those heavy thoughts. She remembered something Deuan had said about the relationship between Kaew and the youngest of the group: "She's been stuck with you for a while, remember?"

Now it was Bell who felt uncomfortable. She didn't know if Kaew wanted to talk about it. Perhaps the two had been close in the past, but comments about Kaew's sexual orientation were touchy ground. Better to maintain good manners and not ask directly—at least not until Kaew herself decided to bring it up.

"Her name is Didi, she's about our age." Kaew frowned. "No one knows for sure what she was convicted of—every time she tells it, she makes up a different story. First, she said she punched someone to death. Then she changed it: the victim had choked on her own saliva during a fight."

She gave a dry laugh. "People think she's exaggerating to seem more dangerous. She wants to be seen as a killer, you know? Fear equals respect around here."

Bell wasn't surprised. Didi was the loudest of the trio, always trying to assert herself as if she needed to take up more space than the others.

"But I discovered that the victim was a co-worker. A bar entertainer, the kind who jokes about beer." Kaew lowered her voice.



"In the beginning, Didi was the highest-paid in the house... until a newbie appeared and stole her clients. First, it was just gossip, then sabotage went as far as putting laxatives in the poor girl's drink."

Kaew clenched her fists, imitating Didi's dramatic tone: "On the day of the crime, the girl went to demand an explanation. But the fight escalated... and ended with the girl dead. All because of a few slaps, she says."

Bell saw the irony in the story—very different from the way Kaew had spoken of the other two. It was obvious that this story came straight from the source: Didi trying to justify the unjustifiable.

"The court convicted her of negligent homicide, without intent to kill." Kaew rolled her eyes. "She hates it. The other two in the group got sentences for premeditated murder. So she keeps making up gory versions to match them... Pathetic."

"That also exists, huh..." Bell finally understood the true meaning of "each head, a sentence." And that was only on her first day in prison. So many things were happening at the same time that she could barely process it.

It wasn't like changing schools, where she could imagine a new beginning. It was worse here, much worse. You had to deal with people who could hate you just for bumping into them, or accidentally looking in their direction. Or, in her case, simply for sitting in the wrong place and "bothering" someone.

"We don't usually have much contact with female inmates of violent crimes," Kaew explained. "The dormitories are separate. We just need to avoid them during meals, bathing, and activities. That's enough."



Bell smiled bitterly. She wasn't the type to seek out trouble; she just wanted to live in peace. But it seemed like trouble insisted on falling on her like an avalanche. Otherwise, she would never have ended up behind those white walls, surrounded by electrified barbed wire, designed to keep in those who dreamed of freedom.

In addition to warning about influential groups in the prison that required caution to avoid conflicts, Kaew also gave valuable tips for the daily routine. For example, about bathing:

"Wait until the line is over, about an hour after it starts. That way, you won't have to wait too long or be pressured by other inmates."

The official schedule allowed inmates to line up for the shower from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., with time limited to ten minutes per person, as Bell had been informed by the guard.

"After 5:30 p.m., the line practically disappears. Everyone has already showered, and you can relax... if you can endure the state of the showers, of course."

Bell didn't fully understand that last comment... until she saw it with her own eyes. The communal bathroom, located near the dormitories, was far worse than any image her mind could have created.

In this women's prison, there were no buckets for showering like in other prisons. Instead, dozens of individual cubicles lined up like a public restroom, each equipped with a fixed showerhead without a hose.

By 5:30 p.m., the place was practically empty, with no lines or jostling. Bell and Kaew were able to choose any free cubicle...



Until Bell saw the actual state of the facility and almost gave up on the spot.

Standing water covered the floor, reaching ankle-deep. The clogged drain was filled with hair and accumulated waste from dozens of previous inmates. Even if she found another cubicle, it would be the same situation.

From the cubicle next door, the sound of running water indicated that Kaew had already started washing herself; they would need to meet the ten-minute time limit. With no other alternative, Bell took a deep breath and resigned herself to facing that disgusting bath.

The small bath towel hung on the hook by the door, along with the baggy, faded green uniform Bell had worn all day; she planned to wash them after her shower. The clean clothes, including her underwear, were folded on a metal rack in the cubicle.

Bell turned on the shower and let the water run down her naked body, lathering herself with the prison-issued bar of soap. She mentally counted the minutes, knowing she couldn't afford a long shower like she did at home. When she was done rinsing her face, she reached for the towel...

But it wasn't there anymore.

The door hook was empty, the towel and dirty clothes were gone. Bell went pale, her heart pounding so hard it felt like it was trying to escape from her chest. She was naked, trapped, and ankle-deep in dirty water. Cry for help? Impossible. How could she get out of there, completely exposed? Every second in the freezing water felt like an eternity.



Bell screamed for help, but only the echo responded.

Kaew, who should have been in the shower next door, had already disappeared, with no sound of water to indicate her presence. Perhaps she had finished earlier and gone to wait somewhere else, or gone back to her cell. One thing was certain: Bell was alone.

Holding her breath, she counted to one hundred, trying to calm her nerves. She had to get out of there. She ran her hands over her body to remove the excess water, then hurriedly put on clean clothes, even though they were still wet. Better to catch pneumonia than to be trapped in that disgusting cubicle.

As soon as she was outside, she frantically looked around, searching for Kaew. No one was there. The towel and dirty clothes were gone without a trace. Out of options, Bell walked to the corner of the building, her eyes scanning every inch for her stolen belongings. And then, she found them.

The towel lay in the middle of the prison garden, soaked in mud—clearly sabotaged, not just abandoned. A little further on, her torn uniform hung from the branches of a tree, destroyed on purpose, useless even as a rag.

Before Bell could even process what she had seen, three women emerged from the shadows, laughing derisively. The leader—that former bar entertainer Kaew had mentioned—raised her chin in a look of pure disdain.

"Poor thing, she didn't dry properly!" she mocked, pointing at Bell's wet clothes. "She'll catch pneumonia and die before her sentence is even over!"



The other two laughed like hyenas, clearly pleased with the perfect trap.

A woman, known to everyone as Didi, faked a worried voice so artificially that it sounded more like teasing than anything else, as if she wasn't the real reason Bell had ended up in this situation.

Bell had almost forgotten that she had once felt sorry for the fate that had brought those three to prison. Now, her chest was tight with anger, but she knew there was nothing she could do. She counted to ten, over and over, reminding herself that she didn't want any trouble, that she just wanted to live in peace here...

Even though that would never have been possible, from day one.

The victim of the teasing lowered her head, staring at the ground. She avoided anyone's gaze and didn't respond to anyone. She took a step forward, determined to grab her towel and clothes and get out of there as quickly as possible.

But before she could get anywhere, a violent shove from behind threw the smaller girl face-first onto the ground.

"You're not paying attention when you're walking, sister! I almost fell, you know?"

Didi's high-pitched voice conveyed satisfaction with the work of the sister in the middle of the group. After all, it wasn't she who tripped and almost fell... but rather the one who had intentionally pushed someone else.



Bell clenched her jaw, containing the fury that boiled inside her as she nearly collapsed to the ground. Her automatic reflexes saved her from scraping her face and head on the cement, preventing more serious injuries. However, the palms that had cushioned the fall were not unharmed—painful scratches spread, throbbing as an uncomfortable reminder. Even so, Bell could only stand up, shake the dirt off her hands and wet clothes, and take the last few steps to her towel, already stained with dirt from the vegetable patch.

When she picked up the towel, Bell realized that this was not just a simple vegetable patch.

Among the fallen branches, she could not even recognize some—thin, others thick—branches from trees that showed clear signs of destruction. The branches were broken, crushed by the weight of the towel that someone had thrown over them.

"The owner of these plants would certainly be furious to see her plantation almost completely ruined..." Bell thought, her fingers tightening the wet fabric.

She turned around, ready to confront the troublesome trio—after all, who else would have a reason to do something so cruel to someone else's plants? But instead of the three teasers, her eyes met someone completely unexpected.

Claire-19 stood there, motionless, her gaze fixed on the destroyed branches scattered across the disturbed earth. Her eyes, expressionless and unreadable, slowly rose to meet Bell's.

And in that instant, Bell's sharp mind connected the dots.

Claire was the person who had crossed the garden earlier, coming straight to the flowerbeds. That destroyed crop... was hers.



Bell swallowed hard, her throat tight with tension. Her palms, already scarred with scratches, clenched the towel tightly as her mind raced through that horrific headline: Claire, the murderer who had stabbed her victim until she was riddled with wounds. And worse were the rumors that, even wounded to the brink of death, she would not let go of her opponent, like a rabid dog.

"I'm sorry... I know explaining it just seems like a lame excuse, but I didn't do it."

"He comes."

"Huh?" Bell repeated, her voice shaking, almost hoping she had heard wrong.

But the other didn't give her time to calculate her next steps. Claire, nearly a head taller, closed the distance in an instant, grabbed her wrist with a grip that brooked no refusal, and pulled her in another direction.

And as she was dragged along, Bell's mind was already racing with catastrophic scenarios, each one worse than the last.

That boiled egg that Bell had shared with Claire at lunch certainly wouldn't be enough to make up for almost all the destroyed plants. She wondered, between one nightmare and the next, what would be the least terrible option:

Being relentlessly chased by a group of bullies, or being dragged by Claire-19 to some dark corner of the prison and beaten to death.

If I were to die, at least let it be quick.



But to her surprise, the place Claire took her to — half-dragging and half-pulling her — was not a shadowy alley. It was inside a building not far from the vegetable garden. At first glance, it looked like an administrative office, with fluorescent lights shining against the darkening sky on the horizon. None of those dark and dangerous corners that Bell had imagined.

Claire stopped abruptly in front of a door, pulling Bell firmly but not violently into the room.

Bell looked around, confused. Claire's face remained impassive, revealing no emotion, not even anger at the destruction of her little plants.

As she watched discreetly, Bell noticed a small scar near the end of Claire's right eyebrow. A thin mark, as if she had had six stitches, leaving a small gap in the hair, which paradoxically added a certain charm to her austere face.

"What are you looking at? Come treat your wounds."

"Huh?" Bell blinked, even more at a loss, fearing she had misunderstood. Part of her also feared that Claire would realize she was studying her face with hidden curiosity.

"Your hands are badly hurt. If you don't take care of them, they'll get infected, turn into pus... and maybe they'll have to cut your hand off."

The long and unexpected sentence came out of the mouth of the woman everyone called a murderer, the same one who supposedly stabbed victims until they were riddled with wounds. But there she was, bringing Bell to the infirmary... just because of some scratches on her hands.



Bell could hardly believe it. *What has this prison done to you?* she thought, comparing Claire to the cruel legend everyone feared. She was almost a completely different person.

"Ah..." Bell made a confused sound, still processing the situation.

"Next time, don't be so soft. That's why they keep bothering you." Claire, with her 5'7" height and untouchable posture, threw the phrase out as if giving indifferent advice—but, deep down, it sounded almost like a protective warning.

And then, without further explanation, she turned and walked away, leaving Bell standing in front of the infirmary, trying to piece together that surreal logic.

One thing was clear: Claire had seen everything. From the beginning. *Did you know who actually destroyed the plants?* And for some reason... she decided to spare Bell the blame.

(Claire's tone was harsh, but the practical concern behind the words was undeniable.)

It seemed that luck was finally on Bell Lalita's side.

After all, it wasn't every day that someone escaped being marked as a target by Claire-19, the feared prisoner. A strange feeling began to form inside her because, if she told what had just happened...

This was already the second time Claire had saved her from being humiliated.

And, apparently, those three bullies had no desire whatsoever to mess with their old rival, quickly disappearing as soon as Claire appeared.



If Bell wanted to survive in that hellish place, one thing was clear:

She had to get closer to Claire.

After all, as the saying goes:

“The most dangerous place is often the safest.”

“The most dangerous person... might be the safest ally.”

In the heart of Bangkok, an open-air shopping mall stretched over more than 60 rai (about 96,000 m²)—a veritable universe of shops, pedestrian streets, and services ranging from restaurants and cinemas to preparatory courses for high school students.

Even though it was a weekday afternoon, the bustle didn't let up. Groups of students in uniform gathered—some going for a walk after class, others heading to the extra courses they had scheduled.

As the sun began to set, artificial lights took over the space, casting a vibrant glow across the pedestrian area. It was then that a young student, just leaving one of the tutoring institutes, stopped in a corner away from the flow of people. She took out her cell phone and quickly typed a few messages to someone...



Almost ten minutes had passed, and the girl was still in the same spot, checking the clock on her phone as she waited. Every now and then, she looked up to watch the people passing by—until a group of students walking out through the sliding doors made her quickly look down.

“What do we eat? How about a buffet? I’m starving!”

“Is it full? Better check the app first.”

It was a common conversation between high school friends, but for the girl huddled against the wall, every word felt like a risk. All because... that group wore the uniform of her old school.

“Natty, are you okay?”

The voice made her shiver slightly before she regained her composure, recognizing who had called her—a young man her age, wearing a different school uniform.

They had met at the preparatory course two months ago. Although they weren’t in the same classes, Joe and Natty often met up; after all, they were dating.

“You look scared. What’s wrong?” Joe adjusted the strap of his backpack, still out of breath from running down the stairs. His class had ended ten minutes late, and he hadn’t wanted to keep her waiting. But something was off. Natty’s gaze was distant, as if she were trying to escape something.

“Nothing... I was just looking forward to seeing you,” she lied, forcing a casual tone, though her eyes still tracked the group of students now disappearing into the crowd.



“This teacher is always late... Shall we eat? I’m hungry!”

“No!” The answer came out harsher than intended, cutting Joe off before he could even finish his sentence. Only then did Natty notice her boyfriend’s puzzled expression, his eyebrows furrowed at her overreaction. She took a deep breath, trying to soften her tone:

“It’s just... I feel like sushi. Buffets aren’t worth it for me—I eat too little.”

Joe, though confused, decided not to make a fuss. “Oh, okay. So sushi.” He didn’t want to fight over something so small.

As they walked side by side, he kept glancing at her. Something was off. The way she kept looking over her shoulder, her fists slightly clenched, made a knot form in Joe’s chest. Even though they were dating, there was an invisible wall between them—something he could never quite break through.

Natty never talked about her family. He only knew the basics: what school she went to, what neighborhood she lived in. Their time together was limited to hanging out after prep classes during the week and, occasionally, a weekend outing. Nothing more.

Joe refused to pressure her. *She’ll open up when she’s ready*, he told himself as he watched her distant profile.

But today felt different...

Her silence tasted like fear.

“That school...”



A murmur arose among the students as the mother and daughter entered the school gates, defying looks and whispers with a posture that bordered on provocation.

“How dare she come back here?”

“If it were me, I’d never set foot in this place again.”

“Why didn’t the police arrest her too? I’m sure she helped her sister...”

“Be careful—she might be armed. Remember what happened last time?”

“Look at her mother... she’s just as crazy. No wonder her daughters turned out like that.”

Dozens of eyes—teachers and students alike—followed their every movement, tense, as if expecting another attack at any moment. After all, it had only been a month since a former student had broken into the school and stabbed a teacher to death.

And now, here they were—the murderer’s family.

The killing had been over a computer worth just a few thousand baht, which the attacker had wanted to sell to help support her family.

The mother and daughter had no direct involvement in the crime, but that didn’t spare them from the stigma. The youngest daughter, then in her fourth year of high school, was repeatedly questioned by police:

“Were you the one who helped your older sister get into the school?”

The girl denied all accusations. Meanwhile, the real killer took the blame alone, never involving her mother or sister in her testimony.



Teachers and school administrators gathered in front of Natty Kunthalak, the student returning after weeks of absence, accompanied by her mother. The educators exchanged awkward glances, uncertain about how to handle the delicate situation.

The murder that had occurred on school grounds had forced classes to be suspended for almost a week. It had taken the police days to complete their investigation, question witnesses, and temporarily seal off the computer lab where the crime had taken place. Even after classes resumed, the mood among the students remained tense.

And now, the murderer's sister was back.

Although innocent, her simple return felt like a finger pressed into the open wound of the school community. No one knew exactly how to act—after all, how do you treat someone normally when they carry, even indirectly, the weight of blood spilled in the very same classrooms?

“I need to be honest with you,” the teacher in charge began, nervously adjusting his glasses. “In the last few weeks, we’ve received hundreds of calls from parents. Some have come to the school in person. Others have even reported the matter to the Ministry of Education...”

His voice wavered as he continued:

“...They don’t feel comfortable having their children study in the same place as... well...”

“I understand perfectly, Professor,” Natty’s mother interrupted, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion.



She was a middle-aged woman whose appearance betrayed a difficult life. A simple blouse—the most presentable one she could find in the closet—her face marked by deep wrinkles, signs of a life without care. Her hair was frizzy and unruly, tied up with effort for the occasion.

She knew very well that her presence there was a nuisance. But she was determined to accompany her daughter.

The daughter could barely look at her own mother. It was obvious that the two had had a heated argument before arriving. The young woman's eyes were clouded with anger and frustration, but also with iron determination; she would not allow the situation to end unfairly.

"I'm very sorry for everything that happened, ma'am, but we believe that..." the professor began, hesitantly.

"I came to ask for a transfer."

Natty's voice cut like a blade.

"Natty!" Her mother grabbed her daughter's arm, tears breaking through the barriers she had tried to maintain. All the plans she had made—to beg the teachers to allow her daughter to continue studying there—fell apart in an instant.

Natty jerked her arm free with a sudden movement. Her eyes scanned the faces of the teachers before her—and found exactly what she expected: the barely concealed relief, an almost childish satisfaction hidden behind serious expressions and the complicit silence of those who would no longer need to make up excuses to expel her.

"I'm requesting a transfer." Her voice rang out, clear as broken glass on a tiled floor. "Now you must be satisfied, right?"



After being bullied repeatedly, Bell decided to avoid eating with the other inmates. She limited herself to the coffee provided by the guards, avoiding any confrontation with the “3D” gang, who seemed determined to pursue her until the end of her sentence.

But that morning, Kaew returned with a bag of bread purchased with her own coupons and handed it to Bell. It was more than just a snack—it was a silent apology for not being there the day before, when Bell was attacked.

“I had to go get the clothes I left out to dry... Sorry I didn’t let you know.”

Kaew’s voice sounded sweet, almost syrupy, as if she knew she had failed her friend. The bandages on Bell’s hands told the story of the violence she had suffered, but she held no grudge against Kaew. After all, it was better that Kaew hadn’t gotten involved and suffered too.

Bread and coffee alone weren’t enough to last until lunch. Eventually, Bell relented and followed the others to the cafeteria. As she waited in line with Kaew in front of her, Bell scanned the room with her eyes. She was looking for someone. And then... she saw her.

Once she had taken her meager portion—half an omelet and a handful of wilted spinach—Bell led the way to a table in the far corner. Kaew was confused, but when she realized where Bell was going, she nearly choked.

“Hey, no... let’s sit somewhere else,” Kaew whispered, pulling Bell by the arm. Her eyes bounced between Bell and the lone figure eating quietly in the corner, as if she were afraid the woman might notice her hesitation.



But Bell was firm:

“I’ll sit with her. You said yourself that the 3D gang doesn’t mess with her, didn’t you?”

Kaew grimaced as she heard her friend quote her own words. Knowing that the 3D gang avoided Claire didn’t mean she herself was willing to sit with dangerous prey and risk trouble later.

“Do whatever you want, but I’m not going with you,” Kaew said finally.

Neither of them gave in. As Kaew walked away to another table, Bell sat across from Claire-19—the same woman who had brought her to the infirmary the day before and apparently held no grudge against her for (not) having destroyed the plants she had taken care of.

Claire looked up for a moment, too quickly to be noticed, before returning to her eating in silence.

Bell lowered her head and began to eat her bland lunch, but at least no one was disturbing her. As she had predicted, being near Claire ensured relative peace in the prison.

However, she had barely taken two bites when Claire, with her imposing 1.70 meters of height, stood up abruptly. She picked up her tray without even looking back, indifferent to what would happen to her.

At first, Bell didn’t understand the danger...

Until her eyes met Didi’s.



It was like a signal. Didi pointed at her, calling over the other two sisters from the gang. Like hyenas sniffing out lone prey, the three began to approach the now-empty table.

Bell stood up so fast that her chair toppled over. She grabbed the tray—half-eaten food and all—and ran the other way. Better to waste food than become a target again.

As soon as she left the cafeteria, Bell didn't even dare look back. She knew the 3D gang wouldn't let her get away so easily. Her eyes darted around, searching for a guard, but there was no one in sight.

Desperate and unfamiliar with the prison's layout, Bell ended up entering an old, not-yet-renovated building. That's when she spotted the bathroom door.

Without hesitation, she ran inside and locked it with an audible click.

She had barely taken a breath when—

BANG!

A violent punch made the door shake.

"That bitch locked the door!"

The voice echoed through the empty bathroom, followed by more pounding. Bell recoiled, her heart pounding so hard it nearly choked her.

She flinched as the doorknob began to rattle violently, each jolt paired with a stream of curses and threats.

"Then stay in there and rot, you cow!"



A metallic click echoed through the bathroom. They had locked the door from the outside.

Bell waited, motionless, until the footsteps disappeared. Only then did she approach the door, her trembling hands trying to turn the handle...

But the door wouldn't open.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Is anyone there?! Please open the door!"

Bang! Bang!

"SOMEONE HELP ME! I'M STUCK IN HERE!"

Bell pounded on the door until her hands ached, her pleas echoing in the void.

No answer. The silence was absolute, as deathly as it had been when she first entered the abandoned building.

No guards. No prisoners.

Just peeling walls and the cold of a forgotten place.

The bathroom itself was surprisingly habitable, perhaps because it was rarely used. A sliver of light filtered through a small vent, painting pale streaks across the dirty floor.

But that wasn't enough.

Bang! Bang!



"PLEASE! IS ANYONE THERE?"

Her voice was lost in the echo of the void.

Without a cell phone to call for help, Bell's voice began to fail, a mixture of anger and self-pity taking over her. Life had already thrown her into prison through no fault of her own—that was ruin enough. Now, she still had to be persecuted as if she had personally offended each of those inmates...

FLUUUUSH!

The sudden sound of the flush echoed in the empty bathroom. Bell jumped, her heart racing. Wasn't she alone?

When she turned around, she came face to face with...

Claire.

She washed her hands in the sink with mechanical movements, her impassive face reflected in the dirty mirror. Her hawk-like eyes met Bell's in the reflection with a look that said it all: "You invaded my hiding place. And now you've made enough noise to attract everyone."

"Shouting is useless. No one comes to this building."

Claire's voice sounded indifferent, almost bored, as she slid across the floor until she sat against the wall, as comfortable as if she were at home.

Bell looked at her, eyes wide with disbelief.

"And... how long are we going to be stuck here?"



Claire shrugged her shoulders slightly, a half-smile on her lips.

"Someone will find us eventually. Until then..." Her fingers drummed on her knee. "...it's a good place to escape sewing class. I, at least, don't mind."

She closed her eyes, completely ignoring the look of horror and indignation Bell was giving her.



Chapter 3

The True Essence

Time passed, but it was impossible to know how much. The two young women were still trapped inside the bathroom of the old building. No one came to help them, no one looked for them, and no one even knew where they had disappeared to.

Why hadn't they attended the sewing and embroidery training? Perhaps the guards thought many inmates had skipped classes, making excuses like being sick—just so they wouldn't have to sit hunched over, studying a craft they wouldn't even use if they got out of prison.

Sunlight streamed in through a small opening, indicating it must have been dusk outside. Bell gave up on screaming for help, realizing it would be futile. She couldn't even hear footsteps passing by—it was as if the place was completely cut off from the outside world.

"Do you often come to this bathroom?" Bell finally gave in to her habit of not being able to stay stuck in her own thoughts for too long and struck up a conversation to break the silence.

She sat on the bathroom floor, just like Claire, keeping a certain distance between them. If it weren't for the fear that the other was a convicted murderer who might suddenly get up and attack her, it would be more for the simple fact that the two of them weren't yet intimate enough to be that close.



They had only met a few times, exchanged no more than five sentences, and had not even introduced themselves properly. Bell knew the name of the tallest one, which she had heard from Kaew—but her own name... Claire probably didn't know yet.

"Yeah... It's quiet here. Hardly anyone comes. The guards only come by in the morning and at night," Claire replied, as if being stuck in the bathroom for hours was no big deal.

Perhaps because they had interacted so little, Bell could almost never guess what was going on in Claire's head. Every sentence she uttered seemed random, as if it were drawn from a bucket, often with no connection to the situation or context. Like that time when Claire, in the middle of a semi-serious fight between other inmates, simply asked to eat an egg yolk... or when she took Bell to the infirmary, even though she thought it would end in trouble. Things like that.

"How long have we been stuck here?" Bell asked.

"If you count from the beginning, about fifty minutes."

"No... I mean, how many days have you been in this prison? May I ask?"

Bell almost laughed. This time, she couldn't even hold back a smile.

Luckily, Claire didn't turn to look at her, so there was no way of knowing if the other would be willing to answer that question.

Claire was silent for a moment, as if she needed time to decide how to respond.



"I've been here long enough to adapt. I know how things work, what kind of people are best avoided... and how to behave so I don't always end up being the victim."

Even without mentioning names, Bell knew very well that the last part was directed at her, the one who had been marked by the brave gang since day one, without even understanding what she had done to deserve so much hatred.

All she wanted was to live quietly, without getting involved with anyone, strictly following the guards' rules, just trying to survive without any problems. But, apparently... fate didn't seem willing to let things be that simple.

"Do you think I didn't try? Or do you agree with them that I deserve to be bullied?" Bell's voice was shaking almost imperceptibly, but Claire noticed and was visibly disturbed. Before she could respond, Bell continued, pouring out everything she had been keeping inside:

"I tried to please everyone, to avoid problems. If something could be solved on my own, I didn't ask anyone for help because I didn't want to bother anyone. But in the end, that's what I deserve, isn't it?"

Bell didn't want to let her emotions take over, but everything seemed to be out of her control, surpassing any limit she could bear.

It was more than any woman could bear. Despite swearing she wouldn't cry, Bell finally succumbed to the pent-up tears that overflowed like a broken dam.



Claire, the unwitting cause of that emotional outburst, was completely lost. Her almond-shaped eyes, usually so piercing, widened slightly as she noticed the tears streaming down her companion's pale cheeks. She opened her mouth as if to say something but hesitated, fearing her words might hurt the fragile girl even more. In the end, she chose to remain silent.

"I ran away precisely to avoid conflict... As soon as I see those people, I change my path. And now I've ended up stuck here, not knowing when we'll be able to leave. Do you really think I didn't try?" Bell's voice was broken. "Or should I just give in to their beatings so this can end once and for all?"

"It won't end. They'll keep going until they're satisfied," Claire replied coldly, speaking the harsh truth. In over a year in prison, she had seen countless inmates fall victim to the same group.

In the most serious cases, they set up situations to attack in groups, all out of pure antipathy. Some were forced to kneel and serve as slaves, as if their attackers were gods incarnate.

And yet... With their close connections to the guards and influence that extended as if they were part of the prison administration, any attempt at intervention or punishment was futile. Even if ten victims came together to ask for help, no one would listen to them.

"Maybe it really is my fault... for being too weak. No matter how much I get bullied, I just bow my head and accept it, even though I haven't done anything wrong. Or maybe... I really deserve this?"

"So I should just get on my knees and beg for forgiveness, is that it? Maybe then everyone will be satisfied. To hell with how I feel, even if it destroys me completely!"



Bell no longer cared who she was venting her anger on. Claire's words, which seemed to suggest that she should simply accept her fate, weren't exactly the comfort she was hoping for—though, considering they barely knew each other, perhaps she shouldn't expect much. But that certainly wasn't what she needed to hear to ease the weight she was carrying on her chest.

"Do you know what it's like to be completely alone? Entering this place is already like being cut off from the outside world... But even worse is knowing that there's no one waiting for you out there. It sucks." The words poured out like a flooding river, impossible to contain.

Claire watched the shorter girl carefully—perhaps for the first time truly seeing her. Her delicate, sweet features, typical of Asians, were now marked by the tears that ran down her pale face, where fine veins were visible. Her thin lips, red even without lipstick, did not stop moving as she complained about her cruel fate.

"I always thought that if I sacrificed myself for others, I would receive something in return... But nothing. I'm exhausted. Today, I don't even know what I want anymore. I've completely lost my identity."

"You always tell me what to do, but have you ever stopped to think about what I want? What I really desire?"

"You *say* you sacrificed yourself, that you abandoned your studies to work and help our mother..."



"What about me? Have you ever asked me if I wanted to take extra classes every day after school? Or if I just wanted to go home and rest, like all my other friends?"

Bell's bitter words echoed like a punch to Claire's chest. Suddenly, she saw before her not this stranger, but her own younger sister—the teenager who had once burst out with the same protests.

Painful memories flooded her mind: the girl in the school uniform, her eyes burning with tears, refusing to follow a future she had not chosen.

"I can't take it anymore! Not a second!" — her sister's voice still reigned in her ears, as clear as that day when she had shaken the walls of the house with her desperate scream. Claire, the older sister who had never known how to see beyond her own certainties, had been paralyzed, speechless.

Claire's family had lost their father when her two sisters were still very young. Their mother, who had only completed a technical course, was forced to become the family's breadwinner, getting a job as a cleaner in a shopping center. Her salary of just over ten thousand Baht, after so many deductions, was barely enough to support the three of them.

As soon as she completed ninth grade, Claire opted for a vocational course — a pragmatic choice to ease the family budget and be able to work while studying. Very different from her younger sister, the family's prodigy: first place in every grade since elementary school, an average never below 3.90. The mother and older sister made a silent pact: they



would pay for all the tuition fees, extra classes, and preparatory courses, all so that the youngest could enter one of the best universities in the country.

But when expectations become too heavy, the accumulated frustration explodes.

"Forgive me..."

The hoarse, barely audible voice made Bell stop wiping her tears in disbelief. Claire didn't look away—her eyes were softer than ever, searching Bell's with a sincerity never seen before.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. No... I should have chosen my words better." The sentence sounded truncated, but it came from the bottom of her soul. Claire remembered when her sister complained about how tired she was from studying, and how she would respond with a "Working is much harder, stop complaining about studying" — harsh words said without thinking, judging her sister with the logic of someone who carried the world on her shoulders.

The truth is... each of us faces different days. Each person deals with their own battles in their own way.

Claire, who had worked hard since she was a child and faced many difficulties, may be more resilient than others when faced with adversity. But that doesn't mean that those who can't handle it are weak.

Bell wasn't that different from her little sister. Claire had noticed how the shorter girl always tried to stay close to her, as if her presence could keep the brave ones away. Even though Bell avoided conflict... what she was facing was still too much. So much that she burst into tears.



"What the hell." Bell sniffed lightly, her face still streaked with tears and the sleeves of her clothes wet from drying herself so much. She didn't expect any comfort — that apology and genuine repentance were already more than she could have imagined.

Claire wouldn't be her first choice to vent to... but the way she listened to her in silence, without interrupting, without judgment, until every word had been said — that already meant a lot. If it were up to her, though, Bell wouldn't have had the courage to spill it all out like that again.

On the other side, Claire also seemed to not know quite how to act.

A peaceful silence enveloped the two as Bell's emotions finally calmed. Crying eased some of the weight that had been pressing on her for so long. For the first time, she felt like she no longer had to carry everything alone.

On the completely dry ceramic floor, although the physical distance between the two inmates remained the same, something was silently beginning to form in their hearts. Bell didn't know if she could call it "relief", but it certainly wasn't the hatred or fear that everyone said they felt for Claire.

It's not that... It's not at all what they say, she thought, confused.

CRRRACK.

"But what is this? Since when have you been locked in here?"



The sound of the door being opened made the two women jump before the guard could even scream. At least they spared themselves the yelling.

Luckily, during the night patrol in the old building, the guard had continued on without noticing. But something caught his attention: the padlock on the bathroom door, locked from the outside before the regular time. He would never have imagined finding two inmates locked inside.

"Get up! Can't you see what time it is?"

They both got up and left the cubicle under his watchful gaze. Bell blinked, her eyes heavy with sleep — she didn't even know when she had fallen asleep. Perhaps the accumulated fatigue of sleepless nights had finally caught up with her. Beside her, Claire opened her mouth wide in a yawn that could almost be heard clicking. It seemed she, too, had fallen into a deep sleep during the afternoon.

"Hurry up! Everyone has finished their dinner. The dining hall closes at four, as per the rules. You've both missed it tonight." The guard's voice echoed inflexibly, without a hint of compassion — like a monk reciting precepts. Not even the fact that they had been locked up by accident moved the system. After all, it was not the jailers' place to grant special favors.

The sky outside was turning orange, the sun dipping behind the white prison walls. As the two inmates walked in a line back to their barracks, closely guarded, Bell glanced sideways at Claire's broad back in front of her.

No words were exchanged. Just a whirlwind of unresolved feelings — about that unexpected behavior... No, she could no longer judge Claire by other people's stories. But what had happened today...



Even after receiving all that emotional torrent — tears and all — the feared prisoner of serious crimes did not show irritation or annoyance. Only a certain perplexity in the face of that unexpected vulnerability.

There, in that moment, Bell planted a conviction in her heart: Claire was not the bad person everyone painted her to be. She was not someone to be avoided, nor the terrifying figure the prison gossip suggested.

In the prison's post-dinner ritual, as inmates dispersed to take communal showers or collect their clothes from the clothesline, most converged in the recreation room. The television, controlled by the administration, played soap operas until curfew. Bell was grateful for arriving at the exact moment when no one would notice their entry — sparing them the inevitable interrogations about their whereabouts. Except for...

"Bell! Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you!" Kaew rushed over to her friend, grabbing her arms as her eyes scanned every inch of her body, searching for possible injuries. She conveniently ignored the fact that Bell hadn't arrived alone.

"I bought you some bread. I knew you hadn't had dinner — I didn't see you in the cafeteria." Before Bell could answer, the shorter girl was already shoving a loaf of bread stuffed with ham and cheese into her hands, magically pulled from her uniform pockets.

"We were locked in the bathroom of the old building. Someone put the padlock on the outside," Bell explained briefly, without going into detail about how they spent those endless hours.



Bell looked down at the generous loaf of bread in her hands, suddenly remembering that the tall, 5'7" woman hadn't eaten anything since lunch either. But when she turned to look for Claire, who should have been just a few steps away, her inmate had already disappeared into the crowd.

"Let's sit down," Kaew insisted, pulling her to one of the rows of chairs arranged like in a precarious movie theater, all facing the regular television. As they settled in, Bell continued to scan the room out of the corner of her eye, finding no trace of Claire.

The thought of sharing the bread stuck in her throat. Had someone brought her food too?

With slender fingers, Bell tore the ham and cheese bread into two equal halves. She was chewing absently when the television in the living room caught her attention — the evening news was showing a face she knew all too well.

The middle-aged politician, surrounded by microphones and reporters, maintained an impassive expression. Behind him, aides were making sour faces while he was speaking:

DRUGS

The bottom of the screen announced:

"Wanchaloem Sangkhabut, leader of the Socialist Party, vehemently denies his son's involvement in drug trafficking."

"As you know, two weeks ago..."



Television footage showed the police operation in the Thonglor district: more than twenty people were arrested in a nightclub for drug-related offenses. On social media, the case took on political overtones when the name of Chanchonok Sangkhabut emerged in the investigation — the son of Wanchaloem Sangkhabut, an influential member of the Socialist Party.

"Let's hear Mr. Wanchaloem's official statement," the reporter announced.

Bell felt her legs tremble. Life in prison had completely isolated her from outside news. The Chanchonok mentioned was none other than her ex-boyfriend—the same one who had disappeared since her arrest. And the man now in front of the cameras, giving pompous interviews? None other than his father.

"I'll tell people the truth: the woman in the photos that went viral is in fact my son's girlfriend. They've been in a relationship since college. He brought her home for dinner a few times — I knew her."

The politician adjusted his glasses with fingers that didn't shake, as cameras zoomed in on every micro-expression.

"However, as a representative of the Socialist Party — whose banner is the fight against drugs — I must be categorical: even though I am close to my family, I will not use my influence to interfere in the case. No type of clemency."

A calculated pause.

"As I have previously announced, my son underwent toxicology tests which confirmed that he was not involved with illicit substances. I ask people to understand that these are separate matters."



"My son has no involvement or responsibility for the actions of the other party. The guilty party has already been duly judged and is serving her sentence as per the court's decision."

Irony of ironies.

Bell chuckled as the report ended. That conversation with Claire about being completely alone in the world—with no one waiting for her out there—had proven truer than she had ever imagined.

Top, her ex-boyfriend, lived within the narrow confines of his politician father. Even if Bell had never pushed him “out of line,” he had always felt the weight of that absolute authority—the way he would shrink from the mere call of his father. Or maybe it was just the fear of having his allowance cut off, this obsession with being the perfect, obedient son.

Bell had always felt uncomfortable with the way Top seemed to have no opinion of his own, consulting his father for even the most trivial decisions.

This time would be no different.

His silence in recent months? No doubt another fatherly order.

"Top"

The name appeared on the phone screen, making his fingers freeze in mid-air.



The ten thousand Baht note was pressed against the glass separating them, almost sticking to the cold surface. The young man in the impeccable suit — even in the oppressive heat — had insisted on coming to the prison.

He wasn't family. Nor a friend.

If we were to call him by his correct title: lawyer for the Sangkhabut family. An envoy.

"Bell... are you listening to me?"

The voice on the other end of the line sounded hesitant, full of doubts about whether he was actually talking to the right person. He received only silence as an answer.

"Mr. Top wants to speak to you," the lawyer insisted, repeating the same mechanical phrase since he had dialed the "beloved" of that woman in prison uniform.

Bell's exhausted and disappointed look didn't free her from that awkward situation. When the guards announced the visit, her mind raced to imagine who it could be — with both her parents deceased and distant relatives missing since her father's death. Friends? Difficult, when everyone she had known belonged to Top's social circle.

Upon entering, she immediately recognized the same lawyer who had convinced her to confess, without lifting a finger to reduce her sentence. The same man who had condemned her to such a long prison sentence that she had already lost count of the days.



And now, what would be its purpose? Just to hand over a phone so she could talk to a "lover" who had never deigned to visit her?

Bell remembered every word of the politician's interview, how he had boasted of his "unshakable integrity," saving his own son while throwing her to the wolves.

Hahaha...

A bitter laugh escaped her as she imagined how many votes that play had brought in. Applause for sending his "son's girlfriend" to jail — what a man of principles!

(Mr. Jet, is she on the phone?)

"What do you want?"

(Bell? Is that you?)

Top's voice suddenly sounded excited, as if he had completely ignored her sharp tone. (How is it going there? Is it very difficult? Jet told me that this prison is special, more comfortable than the others. He arranged the transfer himself. Is everything okay? I'm worried.)

Great, then come try it, Bell thought fiercely, though she kept the words stuck in her teeth. Her face, however, did not disguise the disgust she felt in the least — perhaps the lawyer would take that expression back to his boss.

(And don't worry, Bell! I'll find a way to get you out of there...)

"That's enough, Top."



Bell's patience ran out. She couldn't stand those empty promises over the phone any longer. He didn't even have the decency to visit her in person; he preferred to send his lawyer as if she were a mere administrative matter.

(Are you mad at me?)

His voice had turned everything into a banal lovers' quarrel, as if her months of solitude were just a passing fit of bad mood. (I'm sorry I haven't been in touch... it was Dad, he wouldn't let me...)

"Oh yeah? Your father forbade it because he didn't want you to 'commit' yourself. Am I right?"

(It's just...)

"I saw your father's interview. So proud of his 'anti-drug policy' that he sent his son's girlfriend to jail, while the crown prince gets away clean. Does that make sense, Top? How many years have we been together? You've never seen me use even a cigarette, let alone drugs! And you did NOTHING, just sent your lawyer to convince me to confess. As if that would help!"

(My father only said that to gain votes! You know he can help you...)

"So I'm just a pawn in his campaign?" Bell's voice rose to a pitch she didn't recognize as her own, tears burning her eyes. "When I said I was innocent, no one believed me. Not even my own boyfriend. And now you're saying you're 'trying to help me'? If that's help, you can keep it. Go back under Daddy's wing and save your breath."

(You're insulting my father again...)



It was true—their relationship had never been perfect. How many times had Top used his father as a shield? Everything had always revolved around his father's whims. The countless cancellations of dates to attend high-society cocktail parties. The shameful habit of using his father's name and paternal influence to obtain privileges, like the time he escaped an alcohol-related blitz.

The test had shown his blood alcohol level to be above the legal limit, but all it took was a whisper of the surname Sangkhabut, a mention of his father's political position, and a discreet envelope passed to the agent. The law had bent, as always.

Don't tell me he was lucky he never had an accident, Bell thought bitterly. It was the other guys who were lucky—those who might have died crossing paths with this spoiled brat. Meanwhile, the crown prince remained above the law, protected by the title of "politician's son."

"Let's finish."

(What? For something so small?)

"Yes, that 'something small' of yours is more than enough reason. I'm exhausted."

How many fights had they had? How many times had the same recurring problem cropped up between them, always swept under the carpet? Top always showed up afterward with expensive bouquets, taking her out to ten thousand Baht dinners on his father's card.

But they never—not even once—tried to solve things by talking, trying to improve. The same problems were still there, coming back like knives to destroy the relationship, time after time.



For Top, all of that was nothing more than a storm in a teacup.

"You can hang up," Bell sighed, exuding tiredness and disappointment. She heard her ex-boyfriend protest briefly before the lawyer, unafraid of displeasing his boss, finally hung up.

The thirty-year-old man's eyes scanned the woman in the dull green uniform before him. She was unrecognizable—much thinner than she had been on his last visit before the arrest. She wore no makeup, except for a little powder to even out her skin tone and a basic lip gloss.

Imprisonment had stolen more from her than just her freedom. It had stolen her light.

Lawyer Jet took a palm-sized bundle of papers from his briefcase—the vouchers that relatives could give to inmates after their release for official inspection. Bell eyed the coupons with disdain, then fixed her gaze on the man's impassive face.

"Mr. Top asked me to give these to you. To buy essential items."

They were prison vouchers, the ones she had seen Kaew use to supplement the horrible cafeteria food. Her cellmate had always offered her some, but Bell had never accepted.

The coupons could be earned by working in the vocational workshops... or brought by family members on monthly visits. A privilege she did not have.

Her slender fingers pushed the vouchers back, even though those pieces of paper could spare her from the wilted vegetables in the watery soup, or the nearly empty shampoo that needed to be rationed. So many things—even a single Baht voucher—could change her daily life. But she refused.



"Give it back to him. I don't want anything else from Top."

Breaking up with a college sweetheart should hurt more. But Bell didn't even miss him, not when she remembered all the fights, the way Top had disappeared before the arrest, blindly obeying his father, who feared "contamination" by the drug scandal.

At that moment, she understood the harsh truth: he only thought about himself.

The end was not a wound, but the extraction of a thorn that had been stuck in the flesh for a long time. The pain that remained was just the echo of what had already bled before.

While returning to the women's wing after the biweekly visit, she almost passed straight through the garden where she had faced the three henchwomen. It was then that she spotted—in the exact same place where everything had happened—a branch stuck in the ground. If her memory didn't betray her, it was where they had thrown her towel, making the young plants bend and break.

Bell turned away from the path back to the lodgings, approaching the vegetable garden. She needed to confirm if her eyes were deceiving her.

The once broken branches, lying on the ground like wounded soldiers, were now repaired. "Repaired" was perhaps not the right word—but it was impossible not to admire the dedication of those who tried to rebuild them.

An involuntary smile appeared when she saw the broken stems held together by clear tape, their inner fibers still holding the pieces together. Small bamboo stakes propped up the roots, preventing them from toppling over again. All the damaged plants had received the same meticulous care.



She imagined the solitary labor required for such a feat and the silent love for those fragile green lives.

Claire really was an enigma.

Bell almost gave up on finding her—she didn't even know which cell she was in, since she had never asked for any personal details. She decided to wait at the entrance to the block for serious crimes inmates, until a guard, seeing her standing there, asked:

"What are you doing here? This area is restricted."

Before they kicked her out, Bell took the opportunity to ask about the person she wanted to meet.

"Is Claire here?"

"In the library." The answer surprised Bell. Why would Claire spend so much time there? Apparently, every day, according to the guard, who didn't even need to think to answer.

Upon reaching the small room at the back of the building, Bell understood. The place was an oasis of silence, completely opposite to the noisy chaos of the rest of the prison.

The librarian looked up briefly from her book, gave Bell a knowing glance, and went back to reading when she realized she wouldn't cause any trouble.

Among the cramped shelves—just enough space for one person to pass through—Bell found Claire. The smell of aged paper and faded ink filled the air, a scent more precious than any expensive fragrance.



And then Bell spotted who she was looking for: the five-foot-seven figure sprawled on the floor, long legs taking up all the space. A fifteen-inch Baht manga covered Claire's face, shielding her from the fluorescent light.

Stacks of comic books—*Bai Hua Ruk*, *Maha Sanuk*, *Sao Dok Mai Kap Nai Kluay Kai*, *Noo Hin*, and others—formed small fortresses around her, showing that Claire had spent the entire day immersed in those paper universes.

But she was not alone. A few feet away, a female inmate in her fifties—someone Bell didn't recognize, still new to the prison—was resting with her back against a bookshelf and her legs stretched out.

The older woman had a home decor and landscaping magazine open on her lap. She looked up as soon as she felt Bell's presence and immediately gave her a warm, unpretentious smile. With a discreet gesture, she pointed to Claire—who seemed to be sound asleep—suggesting a certain intimacy between the two.

Closing the magazine and placing it back on the shelf, the prisoner stood up with some difficulty. Bell instinctively reached out to help her, feeling the woman's wrinkled fingers close with surprising strength on her thin arms.

"Take care of Claire for me, dear," the woman whispered, in a tone that mixed affection and concern, before silently walking away.

Bell stood there, confused, watching the old lady's figure move away. She then turned to Claire, who remained motionless, oblivious to the change of guardians. She carefully sat down in the same spot, trying to make as little noise as possible—not out of respect for the library, but out of fear of waking her.

But Claire woke up anyway.



The manga slipped from her still sleep-marked face. Her half-lidded eyes automatically searched for the expected presence of the fifty-year-old woman... only to find Bell instead.

"I came to keep you company," Bell said, trying to keep her voice casual. She was determined to make up for her emotional outburst in the bathroom—and for the episode with the plants in the garden, too, even if that wasn't exactly her fault.

"No way. I'm reading comics." Claire's voice still carried the weight of sleep. She marked the page by carefully folding the corner of the paper before adding the volume to the stack beside her.

"I didn't know you liked *Bai Hua Ruk*."

"How would you know? You never asked."

If this was the first time Claire had shown expression, Bell could consider herself lucky to witness that provocation: both eyebrows arched, a smile at the corner of her mouth that seemed to celebrate a small victory in disturbing her.

"Oh, I'm sorry I never asked," Bell replied with sarcasm so thick it drew faint smiles from both of them. Claire propped herself up on her arms to sit up, leaning against the bookshelf behind her.

Without realizing it, the space between them had narrowed. Their dull green uniforms brushed against each other as Claire settled in—a stark contrast to the distance they'd maintained before. It wasn't exactly intimacy, but more like the walls inside her crumbling.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Ask first. Then I'll see if I want to answer."



Bell gritted her teeth, rolling her eyes—not out of anger, but out of irritation at dealing with that stubbornness. "I just wanted to know what you're planting in the garden."

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's just... I saw all the seedlings broken in the garden," Bell replied, feeling as if she were talking to a child reluctant to make eye contact. The paradox intrigued her — she was probably younger than Claire by a year or two, but the other woman behaved like an embarrassed teenager: head down, fingers intertwined in her lap, voice barely audible, like someone without much social practice.

Bell knew the reality of prison well: there were everyone from dangerous criminals to innocent people like her. But even so... Even she, in her early days, would never have imagined that, by knowing even a fraction of the person behind the reputation, she would no longer fear what Claire could have done.

Now, she saw Claire only through her own eyes—not through the rumors spread by word of mouth.

Some of Claire's behaviors were still difficult to decipher, but one thing was certain: she never treated Bell badly. Never. Except for that annoying habit of always responding in a roundabout way.

"Rose."

The answer escaped Claire's lips like a poorly kept secret. Fortunately, the silence of the library allowed even the most timid whisper to be heard.



"I wanted to try growing roses. I've never seen them bloom—they always die 'before.'" Claire pursed her lips, looking down at her hands. "The seedlings I planted there... I used all my vouchers to buy them."

For the first time in a row, Claire shared something personal without deflecting the subject with another question. A small step forward, but significant.

"But at least you managed to get the seedlings to sprout, that's something."

"I bought the seedlings ready..."

Bell let out a silent "ah" as she understood: Claire's reluctance to talk about the plants might have come from not having grown them from seed.

"Do you want help? My father was an amateur gardener. I helped him with everything from buying seedlings to understanding fertilizers. Would you like an experienced assistant?" The offer sounded almost like a job interview, but without exaggeration. In the last months of his life, when cancer was already consuming her father, he had filled the house with pots and plants until there was no space left. Bell had never stopped him—on the contrary, she had become his accomplice, driving him to the nurseries on the outskirts of the city to buy new ones.

For the first time since they had started talking in the library, Claire looked directly at Bell. Her eyes shone like a child's in front of a toy in the window, begging her parents to buy it.

"Seriously? Alright, deal — you help me then!"



The women's prison housed a one-stop grocery store of sorts—a little world where inmates could buy everything from basic necessities to treats that would break away from the monotony of cafeteria food. Kaew had explained to Bell on the way:

"If you want something special, just ask. The people in charge will try to get it." She herself regularly bought bread and snacks there, like the one she had given to Bell.

Kaew was lucky—a network of acquaintances provided her with extra vouchers. Meanwhile, other inmates, with no contacts or family, depended on the measly 1,000 Baht a month (at most) they earned from prison jobs. Just enough for essentials: hygiene products, underwear, sanitary pads.

Bell knew from the beginning that turning down the Top vouchers would bring difficulties. Her pride spoke louder than necessity, and the monthly payment for prison labor would still be weeks away. She had only one option left, and fortunately, Kaew was willing to help:

"If you need anything we don't have here, talk to Mangpor first," Kaew whispered, nodding toward the short-haired woman behind the counter.

The inmate—identifiable by her faded green uniform—seemed more interested in the paperback in her hands than in customers. Her role there was exceptional, like that of the cooks who were granted small privileges.

As Kaew walked away to get her shampoo and soap, Bell approached the counter where Mangpor remained immersed in her book. The prisoner-employee—who looked to be the same age or even younger than Bell, with surprisingly youthful features—didn't even look up until Bell tapped lightly on the counter.



Mangpor's initial look was brimming with irritation, but in less than a second, it turned into pure shock. Not because she was unfamiliar with Bell, but because of the impact of her beauty — so unusual that even the shy Mangpor was momentarily paralyzed.

"Can you get me some rose seeds?" Bell asked, taking advantage of the unexpected opening.

"Roses?" Mangpor gaped, her eyes still glued to Bell's face with an intensity that was almost rude—but not enough to embarrass her.

"That's right, seeds. Oh, and a bag of fertilizer too, please." It was the least Bell could do after promising to help Claire.

However, instead of writing down the order, Mangpor began to look around, as if searching for someone outside.

"Was it Claire who sent you here? Claire from Cell 19... you know her, right?" she whispered, lowering her voice as if she feared being overheard.

"Well... not exactly. I'm the one who's going to plant it with her. So, can you order it or not?"

Bell's response clearly took Mangpor by surprise — much more than the first impact of her beauty. The prisoner-officer's astonished expression revealed how intimidating Claire's reputation must have been, to the point that no one dared to approach her. Everyone except a newbie like Bell, who always seemed to end up getting involved with her, whether by choice or by chance.



“Okay, okay, we can order it. It’ll be here next week. Is there anything else you need?” Without ceremony, Mangpor took out a notebook and began to write down the order in sloppy handwriting. Bell watched as she wrote down “rose seeds” and “bag of organic fertilizer.”

“I’ll take a look first,” Bell replied politely, stepping aside to examine the shelves. She would need to buy tampons—she couldn’t bring anything in from outside, so she would have to stock up on them right there. Of course, that would mean borrowing money from Kaew again.

Bell entered the deepest part of the store, a narrow aisle where bags of rice, dehydrated foods, and ready-to-eat food packages with unknown brands were stored—some clearly counterfeit, like those black-market clothes that imitate designer labels with small distortions.

She frowned as she picked up a packet of fried peppers, trying to decipher the dubious packaging. That was when a rough hand snatched the product from her fingers.

She jumped in fright. Standing before her was a man of about fifty, dressed in the khaki uniform of a prison officer, staring at her with eyes that seemed to accuse her of a very serious crime.

“What are you doing here? This is a restricted area! Didn’t you see the sign?” The officer not only shouted, but his voice echoed throughout the space. The initial shock made Bell feel her legs trembling, her heart beating so hard it seemed to jump out of her throat. He saw Kaew and Mangpor flailing around, running to see what was happening.



"S-sorry," she stammered, her voice shaking. But the apology did nothing to ease the man's anger.

"Get out! And you" — he pointed at Mangpor — "you're hired to work, not to slack off. If that happens again, you're out!"

After expelling Bell with a brusque gesture, the guard turned to Mangpor, unleashing all his fury on her. The young woman with short hair simply lowered her head, accepting the humiliation in silence.

Bell left the store in a hurry with Kaew, without managing to buy anything. Her hands were still shaking from the shock — after all, she had been scolded without even understanding what she had done wrong. Why was that aisle forbidden?

"I forgot to tell you... only cooks are allowed into the dry food area," Kaew confessed regretfully.

"It's good too..."

"That man was the deputy warden, Vichai. Almost no one dares to talk to him—not even the other guards."



Chapter 4

Behind the scenes

Time passed. The sun set on the horizon and rose again the next morning. Bell began to reflect and realized that, although the crime for which she was convicted — drug possession — was a false accusation, a setup in which she had no part, over time, she had realized (but ignored) that her ex-boyfriend, the son of a politician with whom she had been in a relationship for years, was involved in this world, more or less.

Top had already dabbled in certain types of drugs when he went out to party with his friends. He always vehemently insisted that he was not addicted, that it was just a casual thing, only at social events. But, of course, someone as privileged as him could easily make the police "look the other way" by not finding traces of drugs in his urine... his connections gave him advantages like no other. This time, however, that protection did not extend to her.

A fleeting thought crossed her mind: "If I had asked Top's father, that politician, for help, what would my life be like now?" Maybe she had still been ignoring her ex-boyfriend's crimes, pretending not to see his irresponsible behavior, even though she knew he could harm others.

Bell realized that being excluded from all these privileges was yet another harsh lesson, a reminder of how insignificant she was. Even though she screamed until she was hoarse that she was innocent, no one listened to her. Worse still, she was used as a pawn in a political game, a strategy to gain votes. "If you've never been through this, you'll never understand."



"Everyone remain silent."

The deep voice of a middle-aged man echoed, ordering the inmates, who had previously been murmuring in scattered conversations, to suddenly fall silent and turn their attention to him. They were all called to gather under the main pavilion to participate in a collective activity.

But before the event began, the prison director, a figure who rarely appeared so that the inmates could see him frequently, managed to attract the attentive gaze of hundreds of eyes turned toward him.

Normally, Vichai preferred to remain locked in his private office, leaving the responsibility of maintaining order and controlling the prisoners to subordinates who followed his indirect orders. Unless, of course, there was an important announcement to be made, or he needed to appear publicly as a figure of authority at official ceremonies—more for the sake of appearances than for any real involvement.

This time, it was no different. Vichai, the director, stepped forward and stood in front of the crowd...

Hundreds of eyes turned to a boy beside him. He was a young man with a handsome face, with features that resembled someone—perhaps a younger, less striking version, but still similar in the eyes and shape of the nose. He was dressed in full prison guard uniform, from head to toe, so there was no mistaking him for anything else, unless...

"Who is this guy? A Greek God? He looks like a soap opera actor!"

"Fuck, I'm stuck like you, how am I supposed to know?"



Excited whispers and giggles escaped the inmates, who craned their necks to admire the handsome young man, worthy of a television star. But before anyone could speculate about his identity—who he was, where he came from, what his last name was, or whether he was the son of some important family—Vichai, the warden, reached out and touched the new warden's shoulder.

"Allow me to introduce you: Pirach, my son. From today onwards, he will work here with us."

Bell remembered perfectly the day when the director, who was now speaking loudly to everyone, had yelled at her. His expression at that moment had been that of someone ready to crush her alive if she didn't immediately get out of his sight and out of the restricted area. And even though today he might have already forgotten about her, his face now neutral, without any trace of the fury from before, Bell still felt a chill down her spine.

"If he is so strict with prisoners, what kind of father must he have been with his own son?" she thought.

The young man, tall and thin, took a step forward. His trembling hands, clasped in front of him, made him look like a nervous student about to present a paper in front of the teacher. His face, pale and full of fear in front of that audience of hundreds of people, barely opened his mouth to speak.

"You can call me Porsche. I'm in the control and security sector, responsible for keeping everyone in order."

"And can you take care of my heart too, kitty?"



It was impossible to tell where the voice was coming from, or who had uttered it. But as soon as the chant echoed, the other inmates burst out laughing, chattering like sparrows in a flurry, some praising, others teasing the handsome man. The chaos only stopped when Vichai picked up the whistle and blew a high-pitched, prolonged sound, cutting through the commotion.

"Who authorized you to speak?! Is this a playground?!" The prison warden growled, his voice so sharp that no one dared to argue. His eyes swept over the hundreds of inmates, who immediately fell silent. "Pirach is my son. Treat him with the same respect and obedience you owe me. Is that clear?!"

"Of course, sir!" they replied in unison, like a disciplined choir.

"Great."

With his task of introducing and recommending his son complete, the director began to leave. As he walked, his eyes swept over the inmates like a hawk searching for prey. None of them dared to look up to meet his gaze. The director's orders were absolute, and any disobedience was punished without mercy. There had been cases of female inmates being sent to solitary confinement simply for refusing to participate in ceremonies over which he presided.

Challenging his son, therefore, would be the same as "poking a bear with a short stick," looking for trouble and making life in prison, under Vichai's government, a real hell.

But the moment everyone was sure that Vichai was far enough away, the inmates gathered in groups, whispering and talking among themselves.

"Vichai has a son who's hot? Seriously?"



"He had already mentioned that he had a son, but I didn't expect him to be a grown man already. He must be preparing his heir to take over the business."

The conversation between the three women of different ages revolved around the revelation that had just occurred. Dao, the leader of the group, was known for knowing almost everything about the guards—especially the high-ranking ones, like Vichai. It was no secret that the influence she and her allies had over the other inmates came from their proximity to the warden and even from certain "business" they did together.

But ironically, even Dao was seeing Vichai's son's face for the first time. All that intimacy with the director, and yet the details of his personal and family life remained a mystery.

"We have to introduce ourselves to his son, or will he come after us?" Didi leaned forward, whispering to her older colleagues while glancing sideways to see if any of the other inmates were listening.

"Calm down. Vichai didn't give any orders. I don't even know why he brought his son here. It's better not to get involved and end up getting screwed." The oldest of the group warned her.

Normally, when there was a change, Vichai would tell them before anyone else. This time, however, it was different—he didn't say anything. But no one wanted to complain or question too much. After all, it was the power of the director that kept them "protected." Better not to make waves and go with the current... at least for now.

Before the conversation could go any further, one of the guards shouted an order: it was time for daily activities.



Daily activities in prison varied, supposedly to benefit the community and encourage good social habits, although in practice, they served more to waste time and public money. Today, for example, the work was to plant trees.

"Today we are going to plant seedlings. Each one puts theirs in the pot, takes care of them, fertilizes them... and when they are big enough..." the guard paused dramatically.

"Can we take them outside to plant?" one of the inmates interrupted, excited.

The mention of the word "out there" caused an instant buzz, as if it were a forbidden spell—something none of them dared to dream of. But the guard soon extinguished the spark of hope:

"Planting outside is not your job. Another team will take care of that."

In an instant, the excited buzz turned to screams of frustration. It was common for the inmates to crave any chance to experience the outside world. Some had been locked up for so long that they barely knew what had changed outside: what new cellphone models were available, what movies were trending, or which young actors were emerging on TV.

There were even cases of inmates faking serious illnesses just to be taken to a hospital outside the prison, even for a few hours.

"But maybe some of you can help with the outdoor planting... Of course, only those who are well-behaved and close to freedom. Those who have negative points on their records can forget it."



The guard's phrase was like "stroking and tripping"—a breath of hope for some, followed by a blow of reality for others. While most lowered their heads in resignation, some, knowing that they qualified, could not hide their euphoria.

Bell was unsure whether she fit into the group that could be taken to the outside plantation. Her sentence was only fifteen months, and she had never caused any trouble (except when she was bullied). However, she had just received a severe punishment, which left her far from being considered "close to freedom."

"Why do they only choose those who are close to leaving?"

"To reduce the risk of leaks, obviously," replied Kaew, the only one who always had answers for Bell. "If they take someone with years left on their sentence, the temptation to flee would be great. But someone who is about to be released won't risk more time in jail."

The explanation made sense, and Bell didn't question it any further.

Shortly after, however, Bell and Kaew were separated. The justification was that planting required physical strength to carry pots and bags of fertilizer, so the younger women were paired with older inmates, who might have joint problems, back pain, or knee pain.

Kaew, who was sociable, quickly settled down next to a lady. Bell, on the other hand, stood alone while the others formed pairs.

Bell glanced over and spotted someone who, because of her height, was easy to notice: Claire. She was leaning against the wall, away from the others, as if she had already accepted that no one would choose her as a partner, and apparently, Claire seemed to prefer it that way. It was her nature to avoid interactions and depend only on herself.



As Bell watched the tall figure, she felt a light touch on her arm. Turning around, she found herself face to face with a woman about her mother's age, her gaze a mixture of hesitation and determination.

It was the same woman Bell had met in the library days ago. She smiled, her eyes crinkling into small wrinkles at the corners—a life lived.

"Have you found a partner yet, dear? How about with me?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Bell replied immediately.

The woman, in her fifties, smiled even more, a warm gesture despite her tired face, marked by time and, certainly, by years behind bars. That reality awakened an instant empathy in Bell. She wondered what serious crime the woman could have committed. "Would it be like my case? Convicted for something she didn't do?"

"You can call me Pra Phon, daughter. I'm fifty-three years old."

"I'm Bell," she introduced herself.

As they walked to the empty lot next to the prison garden, Bell noticed that the old woman limped slightly, as if her knees, worn down by age and hard work, hurt with every step. Without thinking, Bell reached out her hand for Pra Phon to lean on. The lady, surprised by the gesture, smiled again, grateful.

"How kind of you, my daughter! What was your name again?"

Bell frowned slightly in confusion. "Didn't she hear when I introduced myself just now?" she thought.

"Bell. My name is Bell."



Upon arriving at the empty lot, each pair of inmates began transplanting the seedlings from the plastic pots into larger ones, mixing organic fertilizer with the fertile soil that the prison administration had provided. The pace of work varied—some progressed quickly, others slowly—but all were racing against time to meet the stipulated goal.

Bell volunteered to carry the bags of fertilizer in place of Pra Phon, who was responsible for putting the soil in the new pots. The conversation between the two flowed nonstop, as Pra Phon was naturally talkative, typical of someone who had lived a long time and had stories to tell. Bell didn't interrupt her; after all, she had spent decades caring for her elderly father and knew how to deal with the elderly.

"Wow, you're skilled, my daughter! Do you like planting?" Pra Phon praised, admiring the efficiency with which Bell placed pebbles at the bottom of the pot for drainage before adding the fertile soil in the right measure.

"I helped my father. Hold the seedling, please, Grandma? I'll do the rest."

Bell followed the instructions without hesitation, mixing in the organic fertilizer carefully and compacting the soil around the roots until the plant was firmly rooted.

"In the past, I used to work as a laborer. I could carry bags of cement up and down the stairs without any problem. But now, I can't do those things like I used to... My knees hurt, my bones are weak..."

She wasn't just complaining. As she spoke, her cloth-gloved hands slid down to her knees, massaging her aching joints with a weary motion. Every step, every movement, now required an effort that had been nonexistent before.



It was then that Bell noticed, for a brief moment, that Pra Phon's expression had changed. Her eyes wavered as if a sudden breeze had passed through them. The older woman blinked, looked at Bell as if seeing her for the first time, and then smiled—wide and empty.

"Pretty lady, what's your name again? Oh, and... are we planting trees?"

This time, it was clear to Bell: Pra Phon didn't remember anything that had happened minutes before. Not even the name she had asked twice, not even what they were doing there. The old woman's hands, which moments before had been massaging her aching knees, now reached out to pick up the vase that Bell was about to place on the floor.

"Did you plant this? What talent! Teach me later, okay?"

"Y-yes..." Bell replied, her voice cracking. She didn't know how to react to the situation, but it wasn't hard to guess what was happening to Pra Phon. Asking her name twice, repeating the same phrases without any joking tone...

Hesitantly, Bell decided to test what she had just heard:

"You... worked in construction, didn't you?"

"That's right! How did you guess?" Pra Phon replied, with almost childlike enthusiasm, as if Bell were a fortune teller.

The young woman pursed her lips, swallowing hard at the realization that was now obvious to her: Pra Phon suffered from memory lapses. Meanwhile, the old woman continued chattering, oblivious to the concern on Bell's face.



"That's right! My husband and I used to work in construction. We spent the day carrying bags of cement from one floor to the next... That's why I have bad knees now; I can't stand it anymore. Oh, but when I was younger..."

Pra Phon's hands, almost by reflex, went back to massaging her aching knees. The same gesture, the same story—repeated like a broken record. And Bell had no more doubts:

Pra Phon was losing her memory, or, as they say, she had Alzheimer's.

"If I say something weird, don't take it the wrong way, okay? Claire says not to trust anyone... but I know you wouldn't hurt an old lady like me, right?"

Suddenly, as if part of her memories had returned, Pra Phon mentioned someone whom Bell also knew. And so, the doubt that had haunted her since the previous day finally dissipated: Why was that woman in the library with Claire? Now it made sense. Either the two were cellmates, or Claire took special care of Pra Phon.

"You know Claire?" Bell asked, surprised.

"Yes, I do! Claire even said she wanted to meet my daughter... Look, it's this girl here. She's just as cute as you, isn't she?"

Pra Phon unceremoniously removed her knitted gloves and reached into her coat pocket, pulling out a crumpled photo. Her face lit up as she held it out to Bell, who leaned in to see. In the picture, a girl in a school uniform—smiling with two fingers in a “V” for the camera—radiated the same infectious joy her mother had.



"When I came here, she was only four years old. Look how she's grown! My daughter's name is Prae. She was the first in her class, you know? She loves English... She's always calling me to say 'hello, thank you,' and that's all I know how to say in response!"

Her laughter was light, full of pride. Bell didn't have the heart to interrupt.

"But does she still remember me? It's been so long... I never let anyone bring her to visit me. I don't want my daughter to be ashamed of her mother in prison. I... I just hope..."

Pra Phon's voice broke. Her fingers trembled as she stroked the photo, as if she were touching her daughter's face through the paper.

"You'll be free soon. The guard said it's only six months away," Bell tried to cheer her up, telling the truth, even though each day can seem like an eternity to those who wait. But at least Pra Phon had someone outside waiting for her...

"I ended up here because that damn husband of mine used my name to deceive others. They blamed me... They transferred dirty money through my account. There were so many victims that I don't even remember how many accusations they threw at me in court. I only know that there were many. Since I didn't have the money to pay bail, they sentenced me to life in prison. They only reduced it to ten years recently..."

Pra Phon's face, which had previously been bright when she spoke of her daughter, was now covered with a deep sadness. But there was no anger in her eyes, only a resignation to years of imprisonment that seemed to have dissolved even her hatred for the man who had betrayed her.



"I've already accepted it. It was my karma, for having married a selfish man who didn't hesitate to sacrifice even his own wife."

"At least I got rid of him. And he never showed up to bother my daughter again... If not, I would have ripped his neck out myself when I got out of here."

There was a resolute coldness in her voice as she spoke of protecting her daughter from that man who, now free, probably already had a new family and had never faced the consequences of his crimes. Pra Phon did not know, nor did she want to know, what had happened to him.

Bell remained silent, watching this woman whose fate was, in some ways, even crueler than her own.

Who said prison is only for punishing the guilty? Here too are the victims of the system's failures, people who pay for crimes they did not commit.

"Korapat! There's a visitor!"

A guard's voice cut through the air, attracting the attention of the inmates who, bent over the ground, were planting seedlings in pots. Bell, not far away, saw the guard pass by other prisoners until he reached the owner of the name. She pretended not to hear, her eyes fixed on the shovel that was digging the ground, without even raising her head.

"Korapat! Are you deaf? Someone came to visit you!"

"I am not going."



She was one of the few who dared to defy the guards. If it weren't for Claire 19, no one would have this courage. She knew very well who the visitor was outside the permitted hours, and that it was not her exclusive privilege.

"Tell me I have nothing to say. We're done."

"It's not an option. He came to deal with legal matters. You can't refuse. Whether you want to answer or not, you will have to tell him that in person. Stand up. Don't make me drag you."

The threat in the guard's tone was not empty—he had done this before, especially to those who knowingly defied the rules.

Claire responded with one final act of rebellion: she threw the shovel hard, making it bounce across the floor. The tall, slender woman stood up and reluctantly followed the guard, under the curious gaze of the other inmates.

As Bell continued to follow Claire's slender figure as she walked away, a sudden shower of dirt and dust fell on her head, getting into her eyes and mouth. She closed her eyes.

Instantly, she began choking and coughing violently to expel the inhaled dirt.

Before she could even look up, the acrid smell of animal manure invaded her nostrils, making it clear what had been thrown at her.

"Oops, my bad! I slipped!" a mock-innocent voice shouted.

"It came at just the right time, huh, Didi? Cow dung really goes with that shit!"



The group of bullies laughed loudly as Didi, the youngest of the bunch, shook the bag of fertilizer over Bell, decorating her with even more excrement.

"Why do you do this to a colleague? Apologize right now!"

In the midst of the chaos, Pra Phon rushed to help Bell, shaking the dirt off her body with motherly gestures. She then turned to the attackers, reprimanding them fearlessly until Bell pulled her by the arm, fearing that the elderly woman would become the next victim of that group.

"Apologize to my friend now, or I'll report you to the guards!"

Pra Phon's voice trembled with indignation, but her posture was firm. Bell, however, knew that such a threat was useless. In a place where even the guards turned a blind eye to certain things, who would defend an elderly and wronged woman?

"You think I'm afraid of you, you old coot?" Didi, the most explosive of the group that called itself "3D," spat the words. At just 19 years old—a decade younger than the other two leaders—she had to prove her worth by humiliating others on a daily basis. She was the attack dog of the trio, attacking even a fifty-year-old woman without remorse.

"Didi, you crossed the line..."

But it wasn't Bell who intervened, paralyzed by the cruelty of the scene. Not even a guard.

It was Dao, the eldest of the trio, who suddenly softened like wax in the sun.

She pulled Didi back before the situation escalated, in a gesture that surprised even her own allies. Only Deuan, her second-in-command, understood the reason behind that sudden change.



Bell also understood, although she had almost forgotten.

"Deuan was taking care of her bedridden grandmother... who kept saying, 'I want to die. I can't take it anymore. Why can't I die? It's torture.' So, she took a pillow and smothered her until the end."

It was no surprise that Dao couldn't joke about illnesses or frail elderly people. She herself had discovered that Deuan had taken care of her grandmother, and when she could no longer bear it, she took the life of her own grandmother. Maybe it was out of compassion. Maybe out of desperation.

Bell felt self-loathing because, even after all the suffering she had gone through at the hands of that gang, her instincts still made her feel sorry for those who didn't deserve it.

"Is there a problem here?"

A deep, unfamiliar voice interrupted the group that dominated the prison, a voice that made all heads turn at the same time. It was the new guard, in an impeccable white shirt, with the name embroidered on the chest:

"Porsche Phuwet."

The director's son.

"You see? We're planting trees!" Didi replied in a sharp tone, still irritated from being interrupted by Dao earlier.

Now, she still had to deal with this rookie guard.

Porsche tilted his head towards Bell, still covered in dirt and manure, and said:



"I didn't know you confused people with plants. Fertilizer is for the land, not for us."

He had been watching everything from the beginning. And he found it strange: why did the other guards pretend not to see the bullying, even with the trio's loud laughter echoing through the courtyard?

"My little sister is clumsy; she dropped the bag of fertilizer. Are you satisfied, handsome?"

Dao, the leader of the trio, finally stepped in, lying with a naturalness that left Porsche perplexed. He didn't need even a second to know it was fake, but what really intrigued him was: what gave those three so much audacity to act like that, even with guards nearby?

"You, go clean up this mess. And you three get back to work. Now."

His voice didn't rise, but there was an authoritative tone behind the order.

Porsche turned to Bell—still choking on the smell of manure—and ordered the three troublemakers to move away.

"I bet he only has courage because he's the director's little boy!" Didi grumbled, now at a safe distance, where she thought he couldn't hear. "Even though I want to scream in his face, I know it wouldn't be worth it."

"Ah, relax, let the handsome guy play the hero!" Dao laughed, half seriously and half-jokingly, not noticing that Didi was frowning angrily.



It was always like this: all it took was a pretty face, according to social standards, for everyone to forgive and forget. Something that Didi, with her invisible scars, would never have the privilege of experiencing.

Let's be honest: Didi had always been average. Not ugly, not pretty—just invisible. As a teenager, her acne-ridden skin became the butt of cruel jokes. Nights spent crying into her pillow, days feigning illness to skip school.

Everything changed in college when she spent her savings on plastic surgery. Suddenly, the same men who had ridiculed her were now lining up to win her over. She had learned firsthand: society treats you better when your face fits a pattern. And this rookie guard? He thought he could play the vigilante just because he had a pretty face and was the warden's son. Of course, he would have perks. Of course, everyone would turn a blind eye to their intrusions.

Bluntly, Didi rolled her eyes. "May I never have to see that idiot again," she thought, mentally cursing the guard.

Meanwhile, in another part of the prison...

"I've told you a hundred times that I have nothing to add. You're insistent, huh?" Claire spat out the words before she even sat down in the chair.

The guard had led her to the legal consultation room—a cold cubicle, unlike the family visiting area. Across the table, a police officer was waiting, impeccable in her faded jeans and white T-shirt, her brown hair tied in a neat bun. Her clear eyes shone with a mix of professionalism and lightness, as if she were trying to defuse the tension in the room.



"If I have to come a hundred and one, a hundred and two times, I will. There are still gaps in your case."

The police officer's voice was firm, but the smile persisted—a striking contrast to Claire's coldness, who didn't even look her in the eyes.

"If you have any doubts, read the newspapers. It's all there."

Claire replied irritably, her eyes fixed on the empty table in front of her—no documents, no files, just a keychain and a cell phone belonging to the delegate. It was always like this: the same questions, the same theater.

Claire couldn't help but wonder: What does this police officer really want from me?

"If you're going to keep repeating what's in the newspapers, why do you need a police officer? Let the reporters do their job!"

"So? Do you have something to say or not? If not, you can leave. You're wasting my time." Claire's voice grew harsher, impatient with the cat-and-mouse game.

But the delegate did not back down. On the contrary, she dropped the question as if throwing a bomb:

"I heard you're close to the new inmate. Is that true?"

Claire's eyes narrowed.

"Where did you hear that from?"

"The guard who brought you here told me. So it's true."



The police lieutenant spoke in a relaxed, unhurried tone, as if she could spend hours there talking if the prison administration allowed it. She couldn't hide her curiosity: since Claire had arrived at the prison, no one had dared to approach her, except for a cellmate who was fifty years old. Until then, the prisoner had maintained an insurmountable wall around herself.

Until...

A new prey appeared. Someone who, in a short amount of time, managed to get closer to Claire than anyone else. Rumors spread like wildfire, distorted, exaggerated, and almost unrecognizable. But the lieutenant, experienced in reading microexpressions, immediately noticed Claire's brief blink and the way she looked away.

It was everything she needed.

"Oh, spare me. What a bullshit story." Claire rolled her eyes, but the tremor in her hands betrayed her.

"True. Claire's 'nineteen stabs' is an absurd exaggeration. Divide it by a hundred, and it's still a lie."

The lieutenant shrugged. It was a fact: the legend of the nineteen stab wounds had been invented by Claire herself, a rumor she had fueled to cultivate her aura of brutality. In reality, there had been six stab wounds in total. Only one had hit an artery, causing the catastrophic bleeding that had painted the crime scene red.

The rest? Macabre embellishment by detectives at the time.

"But today, I have something new to show..."



The policewoman picked up her cell phone from the table, her fingers sliding across the screen until she found the prepared file. A video? A photo? Claire felt a chill run down her spine.

"We found a number of illegal pornographic videos circulating on underground forums. Most of them show **upskirts**, but there are also scenes of explicit sexual abuse... All the victims are girls from the same school. Your old school, Claire. And your younger sister's too."

The lieutenant abandoned any casual tone. Her eyes scanned every muscle in Claire's face, hunting for reactions. And she found a barely perceptible tremor in her lips and the sudden contraction of her pupils.

"Interesting..." she thought. "She didn't know about these videos."

"Our cybercrime experts tracked the IPs, metadata of the files... And we found out who produced this garbage."

She paused, letting the silence weigh heavily.

"The videos were recorded with a second cell phone belonging to the deceased professor. Our forensic team confirmed the identity of the man in the images, even without his face. We were able to identify him by his wristwatch and voice. His name is Methasit Yu-"

The cell phone was snatched from the lieutenant's hands before she could finish her sentence. If it had been any other inmate, she would have been reprimanded for such audacity. But with Claire, the officer simply stood in silence, watching as the inmate's fingers slid frantically across the screen, scrolling through dozens of files.



Claire's previously indifferent expression turned into something heavy, as if she were carrying the world on her shoulders. It took her several minutes to finish watching all the videos.

"Is that it? There are no more videos on other devices? There is nothing else?"

Claire's face lost some of its tension, but her eyes still glinted with suspicion. She needed to be sure. The lieutenant nodded, reaching out to retrieve her cell phone.

"As far as we know, that's all of them. Claire, you realize, don't you? This teacher was already abusing other girls before he died. How many more suffered? And if your sister was also—"

"Nathy had nothing to do with this!" Claire snapped, her voice low but filled with restrained fury. "I killed him because he saw me stealing the computer. It was stupid of him to get in my way."

"Claire..." The lieutenant tried to intervene, but it was too late.

Claire stood up abruptly, her posture now imposing. Her emerald green uniform, still stained with dirt, betrayed her earlier activity in the prison yard.

"If you are not satisfied with my answers, you can come back as many times as you want. But don't expect to hear anything different."

The assassin let the sentence hang in the air before being led away by the guard. The lieutenant remained seated, motionless, as if she needed a moment to process the puzzle that was beginning to form: "The murdered teacher, the illegal videos with students, and the real motive behind the crime."



Piece by piece, the official version of the case fell apart, revealing much darker contours.

In the days that followed the abrupt breakup imposed by his girlfriend without any chance for explanation or defense, Top still refused to accept reality. He insisted that it was all just a misunderstanding, that he could turn the situation around and bring Bell back into his arms. After all, no one could get over a man like him, right?

It wasn't his fault that Bell was now rotting in prison. He had even tried to help. He had hired an expensive lawyer (which she refused) and sent her shopping vouchers for internal use (which she returned).

But none of that mattered. Because deep down, Top knew the truth: he wasn't the villain in this story. He never had been.

Maybe Bell was right to blame her father for everything. If he accepted that point of view, maybe they would still be together...

After days of ruminating, Top had a supposed "critical thought": **he had always lived under his father's control.** As a child, he was beaten for every mistake. As a mediocre student, he bribed classmates to get high grades, all to please his father.

Bell had been his greatest conquest, with a movie-star beauty that impressed everyone. Even his demanding father approved of her (unique among all his exes).

Therefore, Top decided: The termination would be annulled.



After all, that decision was just her whim, discarded — and he wouldn't accept it.

Since the incident, his father had forbidden him from any contact with Bell: no visits, no communication. Everything was supposed to be sorted out by the lawyers.

But Top was tired of being a pawn in his father's game.

After all, the old man didn't even know the truth — the drugs were his, and that night at the club, when the police raided, he had planted them in Bell's bag.

In Top's twisted mind, that made sense: *"If he was caught, it would tarnish the image of his father's political party."*

His powerful father could not save him from public opinion.

Bell had been the necessary sacrifice.

It was simple: if he got caught, he would be the politician's son addicted to headlines. But Bell? A girl with no influence. Someone who would attract less attention. Besides, deep down, he had believed that his father would eventually help her — after all, it was a problem of his own making.

But it all went catastrophically wrong.

Empty promises piled up: "I'll sort it out," the father said.

Days turned into weeks. Bell was rotting in prison without appeal. Until Top decided to confront the old man.

"What's up? I don't have time for small talk."



The father's tone when he opened the office door was not surprising; it was always like that. There was never praise, only cutting criticism.

Even when Top, once the "golden boy," got down on his knees to ask for help.

"I came to talk about Bell."

"Nonsense. Get out."

The man, close to retirement, sighed, gesturing brusquely for his son to leave the office. But Top stood firm, determined to resolve the situation once and for all.

"You need to help Bell. She's innocent!"

"Are you really that dumb?"

"The evidence is clear: she was caught with drugs. Do you think the police will..."

Before he could finish his sentence, his father interrupted him with a sharp look.

"She's gone. Accept it. Do you really think I'm going to risk my reputation for some random girl?"

"But Bell never used drugs! The toxicology tests prove it. That should be enough for an appeal!"

For the first time, Top dared to defy his father without backing down. This unusual attitude made Wanchaloem, the influential politician, fix his eyes on his son. But there was no pride in that look. Only contempt.



"She's never used before, so she'd never use? She got caught with an absurd amount of drugs! Are you so blinded by this bitch that you don't even see reality?"

The politician roared, his voice echoing off the walls of the office:

"You've embarrassed me enough! Ever since this case started, the party has called me in for 'talks.' They don't want scandals. What about me? I have to clean up the mess you made!"

"You only think about yourself! When you gave an interview to the press, did you ask me anything? No! You only talked about yourself, your campaign, your party!"

"SHUT UP!"

The most powerful man in the house roared, smashing the table with his fist. The sound echoed like a gunshot.

"Everything you have—the house you sleep in, the money you spend, the air you breathe—is MINE! I didn't raise you to be an ungrateful son! You're already an adult, but you act like an idiot!"

Top clenched his fists until his nails cut into his skin, his jaw clenched with rage. He swallowed the scream that boiled in his throat.

"Think with your head! Do you want to risk EVERYTHING for some random woman? She's worthless!"

"Don't you understand? You and your girlfriend are being watched by the media! If I interfere, it will become a national scandal! It's only fifteen more months until she gets out. If you still want this ex-convict, go after her!"



It was then that Top dropped the bomb:

"The drugs were mine!"

The statement echoed like a gunshot in the office. For the first time in his life, he saw his father paralyzed, his mouth open, and his eyes wide with shock.

"I... I planted the drugs on Bell."

There was a deathly silence. Then, as if in slow motion, Top saw his father's hand grab a table lamp. His instincts screamed, and he took a step back, but not fast enough.

The object flew like a missile, hitting his shoulder with a dull thud.

CRASH!

The lampshade shattered on the floor. Top looked at the scattered shards of glass, then at his father's face, purple with rage, his eyes bloodshot with hatred.

"GET OUT! Before I rip your head off!"

Meanwhile, in prison...

Bell Lalita had always believed that humans could adapt to any situation. Even in the most extreme circumstances, there was always a way to survive.



She had refused all help from Top, her ex-boyfriend who had always blindly obeyed his father—a man who preferred to be a puppet rather than the master of his own destiny. Fortunately, she had escaped before being swallowed up by that political family, where every breath was controlled.

But today, Bell needed help. Not from Top.

On her way back to her quarters, after collecting her laundry, she came across the trio who had made her life in prison hell. They blocked the hallway, their smiles sharp as knives.

There was no way around it—it was the only way to the barracks. Bell pressed her lips together, her fingers turning white from gripping the basket of clothes so tightly. The smell of manure still burned her nostrils, a vivid reminder of the last attack.

"I won't let them ruin my clean clothes again."

Her first thought was Claire, the only one the trio feared. But the tall woman was nowhere to be seen. Even if she were, would she help?

Dao was the first to notice her. A nod, and the other two turned like hyenas scenting blood.

Bell was already preparing to retreat—it would be better than facing the trio. Maybe running in search of a guard...

But then...

An arm wrapped around her shoulders from behind. As she turned around, her face was level with the person's lips, and the scar on the curve of her upper lip made her recognize Claire instantly. Her face burned red.

Claire pulled her close, her unreadable gaze fixed on the now-hesitant trio.



The prison rules were clear: No one messed with the people Claire protected.

"Come on. You're safe now."

Those few words echoed deep within Bell. She followed Claire, whose arm remained tightly wrapped around her shoulders. Perhaps it was a sign of weakness to still need protection, but when the weight was too great to carry alone...

Accepting Claire's outstretched hand was not defeat.

It was survival.

And somehow, it made her feel incredibly light.



Chapter 5

Breakup

Red-flowered climbing rose seeds were something Bell had just received after ordering them from Mangpor last week.

She had said it was an easy-care, heat-resistant variety that was perfect for Thailand's climate and grew quickly. With all these advantages, Bell could barely contain her excitement and couldn't wait until her free time after lunch. The young woman headed straight for Claire—the one whom almost no one dared to approach—making her way through the sea of people like Moses with his staff. All the while, Claire herself held a stainless steel tray to keep it in place.

“Claire.”

The owner of the name seemed quite surprised when the pretty girl suddenly appeared right in front of her. But when Bell flashed a sweet smile and showed her the rose seeds she had just received, Claire's eyes lit up, just like they did when they were talking in the library. If you still can't picture her, think of a Golden Retriever, its ears pricked up and tail wagging when it realizes its owner is going to take it for a walk.

"Shall we plant them now?" The smile still hadn't disappeared from Bell's face. Seeing Claire, usually so reserved, unable to hide her excitement only increased her desire to carry out what they had planned together even more.



"Right now. Let's go!" Claire grabbed Bell's delicate wrist and pulled her lightly, making her follow. Even without resistance, Bell let herself be carried by the taller girl.

What neither of them realized was that this intimate and affectionate gesture did not go unnoticed. At least twenty inmates, still eating in the cafeteria, watched the scene. More than forty eyes turned, whispering behind their hands, commenting on something along the same lines:

"I told you I've seen them together!"

"Didn't that other one just arrive a little while ago? How dare she be near Claire?"

"I've never seen Claire clinging to anyone like that... There's definitely something there."

And so they went on, with the murmurs and gossip typical of those who love to gossip. The subject varied from day to day, but lately, the hottest topic—the one that always came up again—was precisely the relationship between Claire and the new inmate, something that even the guards commented on in secret when they saw them together.

But there was one person who didn't like hearing these rumors at all.

"Ah, I thought I knew who was eating alone. It's Kaew, the rotten-headed bitch!"

"Yuck, what a stink! It must have been abandoned so many times that her head has rotted!"

Dao joined in the provocation, walking around behind her and pretending to sniff the head of the target of that day's mockery. Didi, smiling, sat in front of her old "friend"—someone with whom she had once been somewhat close but had, for obscure reasons, ended up rejecting.



"Do you want Didi to comfort you?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I don't want to!" Didi replied in a sharp and irritated tone, immediately retaliating against her older sister.

It was fun to make fun of others... but when the target was her, even just a little, the fun simply evaporated.

"I heard she took your coupons to buy things for Claire. Did you let her?" Dao changed the subject, throwing the gossip she had just discovered onto the table.

The person in front of them was just clutching the fork in her hand, not taking a single spoonful of rice since before they arrived. Kaew kept her head down, staring at the untouched food on her plate, like a cat that only sniffs and doesn't eat.

"Kaew here is rich, isn't she? She gives money to everyone, buying affection, hoping they'll stay with her. And in the end? They run away to be with others."

"Just like when you bought Didi, right? And in the end, what happened?"

"Oh, Dao! At the time, I didn't even ask! She was the one who wanted to give it to me!" Didi was already getting irritated, her voice breaking as the two sisters insisted on provoking her.

The young woman in her twenties was already irritated and had no patience to continue the conversation or listen to any more provocations. Meanwhile, Kaew absorbed every offensive word, every venomous phrase that was thrown at her, keeping it all deep in her heart.



"In the beginning, she was always with you... but now she's left you for Claire..." Dao insisted, teasing her nonstop. Seeing Kaew's expression getting darker and darker, she knew she was on the right track.

"I'm just warning you because I care. After everything you've been through together... it's sad to see you being used, giving her your money to buy things for someone else. And now, they've abandoned you, leaving you here alone... Poor thing."

Fortunately, the garden still had a few small pots, usually used for germinating seeds or growing grass seedlings. Bell, drawing on the experience she had gained from her father, began preparing the soil for planting, with a helper sitting beside her, passing the materials.

"My daughter has blessed hands; everything she plants flourishes."

Her father always said that. She never knew if it was just to convince her to help him or if it was true. But they would soon find out.

Four small pots lined up in front of her as Bell, using her bare fingers, meticulously scattered the rose seeds over the soil. Then she took handfuls of fertile soil and covered each pot with a generous layer.

"There! It's done. Can you pass me the bottle of water?"

The agile helper handed her a recycled plastic bottle, the top of which had been drilled to use as an improvised watering can. Bell squeezed the plastic lightly, allowing the water to flow smoothly into the four pots.



Meanwhile, the taller inmate was carefully watching every move...

It was ironic. Claire had tried to grow roses countless times—planting seeds, taking cuttings, buying ready-made plants—but all her attempts had failed. This time, however, a glimmer of hope had emerged. Maybe, just maybe, with Bell by her side, things would be different.

"But that doesn't mean they'll all germinate, you know? Let's hope at least some of them do," Bell commented, washing her hands with the remaining water.

She didn't notice the admiring gaze fixed on her as each careful gesture during the planting had captivated Claire. Much less did she notice how her effortless knowledge of plants made the other woman unable to look away.

"And I know Claire won't forget to water the plants every day, but come check on them every now and then to see if they're okay, okay? Hey... hello? Can you hear me?"

Bell's slender hand waved right in front of Claire's distracted face, whose gaze had been fixed on her until then. The interruption brought Claire out of her trance, and she opened her mouth, making a confused sound of assent.

"I... I understand. Thanks for helping."

"No problem. You've already helped me so much."

They both looked away, avoiding eye contact. It was then that Bell realized she was squeezing the plastic bottle so hard that it was already slightly dented. Her hands seemed to need something to do—an old childhood habit, when she'd get nervous on the phone and wrap her fingers around the cord.



"It wasn't much. Better than letting those others bother you again... Last time, they threw dung at you, didn't they? Next time, I'll-" Claire cut herself off, clenching her fists. "The guards never do anything to control those three."

She was visibly restless, her hands instinctively coming up to scratch the back of her neck. The sentence that came out next was the longest Bell had ever heard her say to anyone, and each word was measured with unusual care. The memory of what had happened in the bathroom, when her thoughtless words had hurt Bell, still haunted her.

"How did you know?" Bell frowned. "Who told you?"

"Aunt Phon. There are several guards who-"

"No." Bell cut in, eyes narrowing. "I never told you my name. But you already knew."

A heavy silence hung over them. Claire swallowed hard before muttering,

"Of course I knew. Aunt Phon tells me everything. You're Bell. The one with the talent for plants."

"...And she's pretty. That's what Aunt Phon said too." Claire replied in a voice so low it was barely audible, but not low enough for someone standing just a hand's breadth away.

Bell felt an irresistible urge to test the other's reaction. She moved even closer, reducing the space between them to almost nothing. And even though Claire was considerably taller, that didn't help her at all in that situation.

"Really? And you, Claire... do you think I'm pretty too?" Bell's voice came out sweetly mischievous, as if she were cornering her prey.



When Claire finally forced herself to lift her face, her eyes collided with Bell's—large, bright, and impossible to ignore. Suddenly, Claire found herself completely lost. Why the hell is she the one getting cold feet here?

"It almost seems like you're afraid of me..." Bell couldn't help but smile victoriously.

Realizing that she was winning handily, Bell could hardly believe that she had never realized how her beauty, so in line with society's standards, could be so useful. They had already tried to recruit her to act in TV series three times.

"I'm not scared. Why would I be?"

"Okay, maybe..."

"And you... aren't you afraid of me?" Claire asked directly, her rigid features revealing her usual distrust. "I mean... don't you think I'm scary?"

It was typical of her. Claire always avoided unnecessary contact to save herself trouble, and honestly, most people didn't think she was worth getting to know. Especially the inmates who witnessed her "exploits" the first day she stepped foot in prison. Rumors spread like wildfire, distorting everything.

"You may say I'm naive, but Claire has never done anything to me." Bell spoke with a sincerity that came from the bottom of her heart. "We've been alone so many times, had so many opportunities... but I never, not for a second, felt like you would hurt me."

She knew about Claire's past—of course she did. The crime that had put her behind bars. A murder. But in everyday life, Bell saw no trace of that darkness. On the contrary. Claire seemed so... normal. Like anyone you'd meet on the street.



But was it really like that? Bell wondered, not for the first time, what it would have been like if they had met outside. In another life. Could they have exchanged more than fleeting glances? Would Claire have even noticed her existence?

Or would they have simply gone their separate ways, ignoring each other? It was so different from what was happening now, in these moments of closeness where Bell could make even someone like Claire talk to her.

Not that prison had its good sides—maybe it did have some, but they certainly paled in comparison to all the negatives. But at least right now, in this very moment... things didn't seem so bad.

Since arriving, Bell had spent most of her time with Claire. That afternoon, after planting the roses, the two went to the library to read comics. Claire, who was now much more talkative, told her that she had come across the epic story of Ramakien through a manga version.

"The author simplified the narrative with expressive strokes and hints of humor. It's no wonder I fell in love with the story," Claire explained, her eyes shining with enthusiasm.

"He also adapted Greek myths! Zeus, Poseidon... all in comics," she added, turning the pages carefully.

Bell smiled. "Last year, I went to a literary event. Almost all the cartoonists were there, signing works..."

"Really?" Claire raised her eyebrows, genuinely interested.

"Yes! If one day..."



Bell swallowed the words that burned her tongue. "If one day... we can go together."

"Take me with you..."

The words hung in the air like a fragile promise. To Bell, sentenced to only fifteen months, the future still seemed achievable. But to Claire, whose sentence was incomparably longer... How could she even dream of it?

Bell hesitated. Should she ask how many years Claire still had to serve? What crime she had committed? But something stopped her.

Claire, on the other hand, didn't seem to waste time on such thoughts. If she wanted something, she said so. If she didn't, she refused. It was that simple. Upon hearing the unlikely proposal, however, her lips curved into a rare smile.

Bell responded with a determined nod, a silent promise that, yes, one day they would go together.

The entire afternoon passed with the two practically glued to each other as they cleaned the prison. The groups of inmates were spread out in units of at least twenty women, but Bell barely noticed the eyes that followed her every move with Claire.

For others, that closeness was inexplicable. Claire, who normally ignored or repelled any attempt at approach, now tolerated—more than that, seemed to accept—the newcomer's constant presence.

"Hey, Claire! Is that kitten your girlfriend?"



The voice echoed from the mezzanine, where one of the inmates had risked shouting the question—probably afraid to go down and find out if the broom in Claire's hands would still be used to clean the floor... or perhaps her face.

Bell, even though she wasn't the direct target of the provocation, lowered her eyes, pretending to concentrate excessively on the bucket of dirty water in front of her.

Best to let Claire deal with it her own way.

Denying it would be the most sensible thing to do.

But Claire went the opposite way.

"Does it matter?" She raised the broom as if measuring the distance to the teaser. "Whether I say yes or no, will you clean the second floor for me?"

"Oh, forget it! Continue your romance there!" The answer came quickly, because of course they didn't want a real answer—just something to gossip about later.

But the fact that Claire hadn't denied it... that made Bell's heart race. She turned to clean a nearby shelf, trying to hide it. She barely realized she was smiling to herself, just from the way Claire had responded.

At dusk, the guards turned on the televisions—showing only carefully censored movies and dramas. Those who wanted insipid entertainment crowded into the recreation room. Those who preferred to avoid this farce of normality dispersed to the corridors, seeking refuge in dark corners or their own cells.



Bell found herself, for the first time that day, separated from Claire. Lately, they had rarely been apart—whether Bell was following Claire, or Claire was inexplicably orbiting the new girl. Thanks to this closeness, Bell's days in prison had become absurdly peaceful. Even the Three Demons (as Bell mentally called the trio that disturbed her) seemed hesitant to approach, fearing Claire's shadow.

Upon arriving at her cell, Bell expected to find her roommate, since she hadn't seen Kaew in the recreation room and assumed she was already back in her room. Her assumption was confirmed when she saw the fan oscillating and the scrawny figure of her cellmate half-reclining on the bottom bunk, flipping through a cheap manga of the same kind Claire used to read.

"Do you read those comics too?" Bell asked excitedly, sitting on the edge of the bed (hers was on the top bunk). She barely noticed the icy gaze that passed over her, filled with a resentment that had been brewing in silence.

"It's fun, right? Claire loves it! There are lots of them in the library—"

"Why did you mess with her?" Kaew's hoarse voice cut through the air like a knife.

Bell raised her eyebrows in surprise. In the dim light of the bunk bed, Kaew's face remained hidden, only her fingers gripping the pages of the manga betraying the tension.

"You mean..."



"Didn't I warn you from the beginning?" Kaew's voice was filled with venom. "She killed someone. What kind of decent person would mix with a murderer?"

The words came out like a gush of accumulated lava. All day, Kaew had heard whispers about how she had been abandoned. Now, anger boiled over.

"Claire isn't bad... she helped me out a few times when I was being bullied," Bell tried to defend.

"I helped too!" Kaew shouted so loudly that Bell feared the guards would intervene. "I protected you from day one! I warned you to stay away from those three! And you... you just traded me for HER!"

Her fingers curled into the sheet, twisting the fabric as if it were someone's neck. In the dim light, her eyes shone wetly—but from anger or hurt, it was impossible to tell.

"You abandoned me!"

"I didn't abandon you! Today, I only went to help Claire plant the roses because—"

"Ah, I see!" Kaew let out a bitter laugh, as if she had finally realized the cruel joke. "So the roses you bought with MY money were for HER?"

Each word came out like a knife. Anger, embarrassment, a sense of betrayal all boiled up inside her. In Kaew's mind, the narrative was clear: Bell had used her and now she was discarding her once she had found someone "better."



"I told you it was a loan! As soon as I have the money, I'll pay you back—"

"No need." Kaew's voice dripped with venom. "Save your money for your NEW friend."

She continued to spit out sharp words, as if each syllable could transfer a bit of her pain to Bell. It didn't matter if it destroyed any friendship they once had at this moment; Kaew just wanted Bell to feel a fraction of her anguish.

"You've been nothing but critical of me since I arrived! What did I do so wrong? You're my friend, Claire too—"

"If you want to be with HER, then don't consider me a friend anymore." Kaew's voice lowered, feigning false sweetness. "I don't want to be friends with someone who hangs out with murderers. How dare you be alone with her? Aren't you afraid that, in a fit of rage, she'll hang you while you sleep?"

It sounded like concerned advice, but it was pure manipulation. Kaew kept repeating the same old story about how Claire was dangerous and untrustworthy—without ever trying to really get to know her.

"If Claire wanted to hurt me, she would have done it a long time ago," Bell replied, holding back her own anger. It was strange to see how her cellmate—someone she thought she knew—could transform like this, revealing a completely unknown side.

Kaew didn't want to hear explanations. She had already decided who Claire was and who Bell had become.



"Maybe you'll only understand when she finally attacks you."

BANG!

"Quiet there! Do you want me to call for backup?" A guard knocked on the cell door, interrupting the argument. Bell bit her lip hard as she heard Kaew's last words. Anger was taking over both of them, and each wanted nothing more than to hurt the other.

But Bell knew that, in the end, she was already losing. She never imagined that Kaew could be so cruel.

Bell didn't allow disappointment to consume her—or rather, she simply refused to stay in that shared space with Kaew for even a second. She climbed up to the top bunk in a sudden movement, wrapped herself in the blanket, and turned to the side, facing the wall.

Kaew, presumably, did the same. They didn't have any of those whispered bedtime conversations like they used to.

It was almost hard to remember how close the two had once been when Bell had first arrived in that cell. Back then, the space hadn't felt so cramped, so suffocating. Now, each breath was labored, as if the air were being slowly drained, even as the fan oscillated, its mechanical noise echoing in the heavy silence.

In the last minutes before curfew, when no inmate could remain outside after 8:30 p.m., Claire took the opportunity to make a quick visit to the garden. Under the dim light of a streetlamp, she checked the pots of roses.



They were still there, intact, leaning against the wall as she had left them. No one had destroyed or thrown them away. Seeing them, a warm relief spread through her chest. The path back to the accommodation was taken with a lighter step, her mind full of images: green buds appearing, red petals opening... Just this possibility already filled her with a rare happiness.

And even if those flowers never bloomed, Claire wouldn't care.

Because, in the end, she had already gained something much bigger.

“Thank you, Bell.”

If someone were to say that the slight, almost imperceptible curve of Claire's lips when she encountered something that made her happy was a smile... well, they could hardly be wrong.

Fortunately, no one saw her in that empty hallway. Everyone had already gone to bed. If any outside eyes had witnessed that scene, rumors would have spread like wildfire: “Claire of Nineteen Knives is in love! I saw her smiling alone in the hallway!”

When she arrived at her cell, she found herself in the same bunks as always. Originally, Claire had occupied the bottom bunk—until the day she voluntarily swapped with her older companion, whose ruined knees made her groan with every movement. Getting on and off the top bunk was a minor effort, considering the old woman's constant pain.

Claire entered silently, treading lightly so as not to disturb her cellmate's sleep. But as she prepared to climb up to the top bunk, something made her stop.



Aunt Phon was not lying down. She was sitting up in bed, her head lolling forward at an odd angle, as if she had fallen asleep abruptly. In her wrinkled hands were worn photographs of a smiling girl, from her early years to her elementary school uniform. It was Phon's nightly routine: revisiting the moments of the daughter who was no longer there.

Claire hesitated, then decided to wake her up gently. No one deserved to wake up with a sore neck. But when she touched her arm...

Phon's skin was cold and clammy with sweat. The body did not react to touch. And the chest did not rise or fall.

Claire shook Aunt Phon's arm harder.

"Aunt Phon? Wake up. Let's go to bed properly..." Her voice, now louder, echoed in the silent cell.

Nothing.

The photographs slipped from the old woman's limp fingers, scattering across the mattress. It was then that fear took hold of Claire—not because of the chaos of the fallen pictures, but because of the way they had fallen. It wasn't a deliberate movement. It couldn't be. Phon's body remained still, her breathing absent. The photos of her daughter, now spread out on the bed, seemed like a final, silent goodbye.

Phon's arm fell to her side, limp as a wet rag.

Claire looked at the face of that woman in her fifties, the same one who had always entertained her with stories during the long days in prison.

Her pale lips were parted, a trickle of saliva running down her chin. Her eyelids were half-closed. Phon had left while admiring the photos of her daughter.



"No... This can't be happening. Auntie Phon! **AUNTIE PHON!**"

Claire shook the woman's shoulders, her trembling fingers searching for a sign of life in her pulse, in her neck. Nothing. Her skin was too cold.

"Help! Someone, please! HELP!"

Her scream tore through the nightly silence of the prison, echoing through the empty corridors.

Claire's scream echoed through the hallway, her voice cracking with desperation and none of its usual coldness. "Aunt Phon can't leave like this... she only had six months left until her freedom!"

It was then that her gaze caught sight of something disturbing beside the bed: Phon's medicine bottle.

Although it contained only common painkillers, Claire knew that the elderly woman had received a new bottle a few days ago—complaining of pain due to constant headaches.

But now...

The bottle was empty.

Completely.



Not a single pill left.

And Claire knew Phon well enough to know: she wasn't the type to waste medicine.

There was only one possible explanation.

Phon swallowed each pill.

Claire let out a hoarse groan, like a wounded animal, and buried her face in her hands. Waves of guilt hit her. *If I had come back earlier... Could I have avoided it?*

But the truth was crueler: Phon had not committed suicide.

Dementia. That — damned dementia — had made her do it again.

One pill.

Then another.

And one more.

As if she were drinking water.

Until the bottle was empty.

Aunt Phon...

Phon simply forgot she had already taken it.

Medical-Legal Report

Name: Mrs. Suphaporn Saichamnong



Cause of death: Acute liver failure due to chronic paracetamol overdose.

Contributing factors: History of diabetes mellitus (hypoglycemia at the time of death). Senile dementia (repeated self-medication without control).

Claire spent the entire night under interrogation. The guards wanted to understand exactly when she had discovered the body. With each question, her guilt grew:

"I should have known... She was so confused lately..."

But the truth was more complex. Phon had not died from a single mistake, but from a prison that failed to protect its most vulnerable inmates.

When the sun rose the next day, the Department of Corrections returned Phon's body to her family. Claire couldn't hold back her sobs as she said goodbye to one of the few people who had been kind to her in that place.

Phon was finally going home. She would finally see her daughter again.

But why, Claire thought with a broken heart, had life denied them the chance to embrace each other while there was still time? Why steal the very hope that had kept Phon alive all those years — the simple light of being able to see her child again?

Bell didn't find Claire in the cafeteria that morning. She sat alone, and since the argument with Kaew the night before, she had avoided any contact. She had woken up to an empty cell, and the anger still throbbed in her chest. There was no point in trying to talk to someone so inflexible, so determined to see only evil in others.



But even without the conflict with Kaew, Bell sensed something was wrong in the air. The inmates were whispering in groups, their faces tense. Even before the first bite, she heard fragments from the table next to her:

"I heard from Grandma Daeng that someone died last night. I don't know which ward."

"Grandma Daeng and her stories... Three months ago, she swore that Chan fell down the stairs and broke his neck. It turned out to be just an arm in a cast."

"This time Grandma Daeng is right. I saw the hearse parked at dawn. They took the body away."

"Or did they just take them to the hospital? Tomorrow the old lady comes back with a cast on her arm and an 'I'm alive, idiots.'"

Bell felt a chill down her spine. If there really was a death in prison and the authorities were covering it up, what would that mean? Fear of general panic? Or fear that other inmates, already fragile, would crumble upon learning?

"Could it be... someone was close to being released?" a voice whispered. "I heard that when it's almost time, it's best not to count the days. Not to spread them around. Otherwise... you'll never get out. Someone always pulls you back into the darkness."

"I heard that too! Remember Auntie Nok? The one who took the blame for her son? She was only two months away from release... and she disappeared. Grandma Daeng said she 'died in her sleep' without any illness, without anything. She just didn't wake up."

"And then they pretended she was released? Fuck... What if her spirit now comes looking for a replacement?"



The gossip circle turned into a scary story session. Voices were lowered, not for fear of being heard, but to add more excitement. Muffled screams arose at each macabre detail. The myth grew stronger:

Never celebrate your freedom before its time.

Or you become the next victim.

"If you celebrate before time... you'll never get out. You'll become a ghost condemned to haunt the prison."

Bell's heart skipped a beat.

It all made sense now: Claire missing breakfast... And that conversation a few days ago, when Phon, with shining eyes, had told her about the daughter she would soon be reunited with.

"No... It can't be..."

Before anyone could continue, a shout from the courtyard echoed through the cafeteria. Cutlery fell onto the tables. Bell was the first to stand up, not out of morbid curiosity, but because she recognized that hoarse, desperate voice.

"GET OUT NOW! Look me in the eyes and speak, you coward!"

Hey, Claire.

And from the tone, something terrible was about to happen.

"Claire of the Nineteen Knives" — the scream echoed through the courtyard, attracting inmates and guards like vultures. The scene that unfolded was surreal: Director Vichai, dragged out of his office, was now facing an unprecedented revolt.



To Vichai, these women were like stray dogs who only needed tighter leashes. But the animal he had underestimated was now growling at the sight of his words.

"You know the consequences of causing a disturbance, don't you?" His voice was an icy edge, calculated to convey dominance. He didn't need to shout. He just stood there, unmoving, his eyes scanning Claire like a butcher assessing cattle.

Claire fought like a cornered beast, requiring two guards to restrain her. Still, she managed to writhe and scream:

"I told you that Phon was sick! But what did you do? NOTHING!"

The last time anyone saw the 5-foot-7 inmate raging out of control was during her first year in prison. No one could contain her brute strength until a third, more burly guard finally immobilized her.

Director Vichai just rolled his eyes.

"Illness and death are normal for old people. Have you never heard of old age?"

His voice had the coldness of a bureaucrat signing some paperwork.

"Phon didn't die of old age! She had Alzheimer's and needed special care!" Claire spat the words out like bullets. "But you treated her like any other. Why? Too busy licking the boots of others! VIP prisoners who forget about others? When will they learn to see EVERYONE as human?"

The crowd of inmates was growing by the minute—twenty, thirty women now. Warden Vichai calculated the risk: every second of Claire's speech was one more second of fuel for a riot.



The secret was out. His strict orders to silence the night's death had failed. And all because that damned Claire insisted on "justice" for an old woman who, in her opinion, had her days numbered anyway.

"Take her to solitary confinement! For disturbing the peace and inciting panic!" Vichai's order echoed like a divine decree.

Five guards dragged Claire, who struggled with the strength of desperation, her blazing eyes fixed on the warden.

"Shut up if you can't handle the truth!"

That's when Bell emerged from the crowd. Before she could reach Claire, a guard blocked her. Whispers spread:

"Why solitary confinement?"

"So it's true... Phon died and they're hiding it from us!"

Vichai remained impassive, raising his voice:

"Anyone else who wants to follow her, just keep going!"

"I hereby officially inform you that Ms. Suphaporn had been suffering from chronic health problems for years," Vichai said in a smooth voice. "The prison system has always provided regular medical checkups for the elderly—including hemodialysis and blood tests. Yesterday, she passed away in the hospital after acute kidney failure. Her body has now been released to her family."

Bell tasted the bitterness of the lie. She had met Phon. Everyone knew about the old woman's dementia. Yes, Phon was still able to live a normal life, but any doctor would tell you that an Alzheimer's patient needed constant supervision—something the prison had never provided.



"I ask that you share only the real facts," Vichai continued, his gaze sweeping the crowd like a blade. "Spreading rumors is a crime."

"Understood!" The inmates responded in a discordant chorus, some exchanging hesitant glances. Who should they believe? Claire, who, despite her turbulent history, had been quiet lately? Or Warden Vichai, whose punishments for disobedience were legendary?

As the group dispersed, Bell finally broke free from the guard holding her. She had barely taken a step towards solitary confinement when two figures cut across her path:

The bob-haired woman and her corpulent companion.

Bell knew that face. Every time they appeared, the day ended in pain.

"Where's your bodyguard now?" Didi came up behind her, deliberately tripping her foot and nearly knocking Bell over. But what really made her eyes widen was who was coming from behind:

Kaew.

Her former cellmate didn't even look at Bell. She stood beside Dao, her head held high as if she had never warned Bell to avoid those dangerous women.

"I heard you used Kaew's money to please your 'girlfriend.'" Didi smiled, sharpening her words. "Now that Claire is in solitary confinement... who will protect you?"

"At least six days in solitary confinement!" It could be said that Bell was lucky this time—she didn't suffer any physical assault. The guards were still patrolling nearby, and even the Three Devils avoided excesses under their watchful gaze.



But the words hurt more than punches:

"Out of hatred for me, you support what they did to Phon? She was a real person!" Bell's voice trembled with anger. Claire was being silenced, Kaew had betrayed her... Everything seemed to be falling apart.

"So what? It wasn't my mother," Didi spat, until Deuan interrupted her:

"Calm down. Respect the dead."

The glare she received in response showed that, this time, not even the hierarchy of the trio remained intact.

"Why are you defending that old hag?" Didi growled, confused by Deuan's interference.

"Shut up! Do you think you're a soap opera villain?" Dao slapped the table, pretending to reprimand them both, but her real target was Didi.

Only she knew Deuan's dark past—the reason why talking about old people affected her so much. The two had served time together before Didi arrived. They shared intimate secrets: the husband Dao had stabbed, the bedridden grandmother Deuan had suffocated out of pity.

Didi was the only one outside. The newbie who only knew they were trapped, not why.

Didi had always tried to prove herself; after all, she was the only one of the trio without a history of homicide or influence over the guards. But now, under Dao's icy gaze, she swallowed her pride and fell silent.



"Do you know how much pain Kaew is in?" Dao spoke, revealing her true reason. "She came to us because she had nowhere else to go. We did it out of pity... No one deserves to be abandoned like trash."

Her eyes gleamed mischievously as she continued:

"Now that your 'bodyguard' is in solitary confinement... how will you survive alone?"

It was true that Bell had sought protection from Claire, staying close to avoid persecution. It had worked well so far. But it wasn't just self-interest. Now, she genuinely cared about Claire, locked in solitary confinement after losing Phon, the only mother figure she had left.

Bell's heart felt like a stone.

"Do you want to lick my boots like Kaew?" Didi smiled, extending her foot dramatically. "I'll accept you in the group. How about it?"

But now, Bell faced a cruel dilemma:

"So what? Go lick my boots..." Didi stepped forward, her smile twisted with malice.

"...Or would you rather wait for your girlfriend to escape solitary confinement to save you?"

The circle of inmates laughed. The question was a trap; any answer would mean humiliation.



Chapter 6

The Weight on your Back

"It's just lipstick, no need to fight over it!"

"You're a man, you wouldn't understand."

From the first day he started working, Porsche never had a day without problems. Previously, he thought the women's wing of the prison would have fewer headaches than the men's wing. But no.

Although physical assaults were less frequent, they still occurred. During his rounds, he had to intervene in fights between inmates at least two or three times a day, always for different reasons. This time, the argument was over whose lipstick it was.

Even when deprived of their freedom, women did not give up certain things. The right to beauty and personal care still remained intact.

"Then it's settled. I'll bring you a new lipstick so you can stop fighting."

Porsche made an offer no one could refuse. The lipstick in question had been provided by the Department of Corrections, which had received donations from a women's rights fund. The project collected lipsticks that were still past their expiration date, melted them down, and reshaped them into new products, which were distributed to prisons across the country. The lipsticks were then sold to inmates at nominal prices.



But there was a problem: the packaging was identical in every detail, making it impossible to tell which lipstick belonged to whom. This often caused confusion among the inmates—some would take the wrong lipstick by mistake, while others would intentionally steal lipsticks from their colleagues, especially the "bosses" of the ward, who would often take things from the weaker ones, who had no way of fighting back.

"Are you going to give it away?" asked one of the women, her tone softer, no longer defiant as before.

"I'm only going to give one of you a new lipstick. As for this one, whoever owns it can take it back."

The situation seemed to have become even tenser than before. If he had to compare, Porsche would remember the Aesop fable he had heard as a child: "The Golden and Silver Axe." But in this case, there was no honest lumberjack, and no one wanted to admit the truth. And after he offered a new lipstick, who would want to keep the used one, which was already almost half-used?

To solve the problem once and for all, Porsche confiscated the old lipstick, putting an end to the dispute that had been going on for so long.

At 23, he had graduated a little over a month earlier in Social Work. So, when his father offered him a job as a prison guard at this women's prison, he didn't turn it down. Even though it meant having to go through a selection process—given the low number of applicants and the fact that the job was not at all attractive and could be dangerous at any time—Porsche ended up being accepted without any difficulty or questioning.



Since high school, Porsche had never had a clear goal for the future. He chose his college course following his father's wishes. From a young age, he watched his father gradually climb the ranks, starting as a prisoner monitoring agent until he became the feared and strict warden of the prison. Although he did not quite understand why his father had ordered solitary confinement for that inmate a few days earlier.

Not that he didn't know about the death of that prisoner. In fact, deaths were common there. Between the accusations that his father had neglected the death and the father's insistence that the woman had died of "old man's disease" in the hospital, Porsche firmly decided to believe his father's version.

Even though the decision to put the inmate in solitary confinement seemed a bit extreme, Porsche wasn't surprised. His father had always used the "education with a rod" method when he had done something wrong as a child. Here, in prison, it was probably no different—harsh measures to maintain control over everyone. His father was like that.

At the end of each workday, most prison guards couldn't just go home. There were night shifts and on-call duties, depending on the schedule. Porsche had already accepted that he would spend most of his life inside the prison—after all, even his father rarely came home. Weekends, holidays, and even some special days were dedicated to work.

Tired, the young man dragged his feet to the rest room to regain his energy.

In the room next to the administrative staff's office, he refused to turn on the lights, letting the darkness envelop him as he stretched his legs out on the couch. He picked up his cell phone—the battery of which had barely run out since



he had hardly used it all day—and began browsing, replying to messages here and there, until he finally gave in to sleep.

"I've seen the reports. Sales are down almost half compared to last month. What's going on?"

"Is this serious?"

"I should be the one asking. You never told your own son about..."

Fragments of the conversation leaked through the poorly closed bedroom door, causing Porsche—who was not yet completely asleep—to wake with a start. The deep, unmistakable voice was that of his father. As for the female voice, he wasn't sure who it was—it sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"What does my son have to do with this?"

"For the past few days, your son has been inspecting cell after cell almost daily, looking for suspicious or illegal items. Now no one dares to buy our products anymore!" The same woman spoke with a tone of provocation and sarcasm.

Porsche lay still on the bed, listening to something he wasn't prepared for.

Everything would be different if the conversation didn't mention illegal items... but, worse than that, his father seemed to be completely involved and complicit in the situation.

"I tell him to stop. I've never actually told him to do that." Porsche had never seen his father give in or be flexible with anyone before, not even his mother.



But this time, even when the woman was giving orders or when she crossed the line with her words, his father did not scold her in the slightest.

"I still haven't gotten over the fact that you brought your son to work here. You could have warned me sooner."

"Dao, we've already talked about this. Why bring up this matter and fight again?"

Suspicion began to form in Porsche's mind from the pronouns the two used toward each other... until he finally figured out who the woman was when his father let slip her name. His throat felt dry, as if he hadn't had a drink of water in hours. His heart felt heavy, as if a large stone was crushing it, as he realized the unexpected... No, this was not unexpected. It had already been happening long before he got there.

The sound of the doorknob creaking echoed through the room where Porsche was lying. A moment later, the light came on, causing his eyes, already accustomed to the darkness, to blink rapidly. He didn't even need to look to know who was at the door. Director Vichai had noticed that the door was ajar, and although he expected to find a prison guard resting, he never imagined that it would be his own son.

"Come out for a moment," Vichai whispered to his interlocutor.

Or, to be more precise, she was Dao, the leader of the 3D gang, who controlled the prison with absolute influence.

At that moment, Porsche finally understood why the other officers pretended not to see when these inmates bullied the other prisoners. It all made sense now that they had direct connections to the warden.



Porsche propped himself up and sat up in bed but avoided looking his father directly in the eyes.

"Is his father close to her?"

"Dao knows everyone. She has the best contacts; after all, she's been in prison for a long time."

"If we want to keep the prisoners under control, we need allies within the system. You know it's not easy," his father replied with a long explanation, as he always did when he tried to justify his actions, as if he were using every possible argument to convince whoever would listen to him.

"And the illegal items you mentioned... what exactly are they?" It was true that Porsche had always avoided questioning his father, accustomed to his strictness and the consequences of disobeying him. But what he had just heard went against everything his father supposedly stood for. If the woman's case still raised doubts, the smuggling of illegal goods was something he could not ignore.

"Listen up. You're new here, and you don't understand how things work yet. There's a reason I didn't tell you before." The prison warden paused, took a deep breath, and continued, "This happens everywhere. They bring in items from outside to sell to inmates; they act as middlemen between inmates and their families for side 'businesses'... There's a lot more to this job than you might think, and you'll learn as you go."

"What is this, Father? Corruption, is it?" Porsche's voice grew hard, his brows furrowed in a mixture of disbelief and disgust. It wasn't that he didn't understand what was happening—he did. What he couldn't comprehend was how the father he had always admired could get involved in something like this.



"In your first days here, I overlooked your impulsiveness. But I'll warn you: when you see something wrong, sometimes it's better to close your eyes and let it go. You don't have to go out and face everything. We have to know how to live. Over time, you'll understand."

The bruise at the corner of her mouth was already turning green, a sign that it was healing. Bell sighed as she looked at the cuts that contrasted with her clear, flawless skin reflected in the bathroom mirror. She had earned those wounds after refusing to kneel and kiss the feet of the one who had caused them.

Luckily, Bell hadn't suffered anything worse. Or rather, she should never have gone through this in the first place. People always find reasons to bully others: sometimes it's a direct dislike, sometimes an unintentional misunderstanding, and sometimes it's just the need to prove one's superiority—older, stronger, and more respected. Bell's bad luck was that the 3D gang was after her for all of these reasons at once.

The young woman returned to her room during her break, unwilling to leave for fear of encountering more trouble. Besides, she was now completely alone: Claire had not yet been released from the isolation cell, and Aunt Phon, who she could at least talk to, had already gone...

Remembering Aunt Phon's warm smile during their conversations, Bell's eyes filled with tears. She shook her head, trying to shake the image of the old woman away before the tears overcame her again.

Even in her tiny room—where she had once felt safe—there was now only a heavy silence. Everything had changed that night when her roommate, Kaew, had fought with her for a ridiculous reason: jealousy because Bell had gotten close to other people. Before they could reconcile, Kaew deliberately



walked away... and joined the very group that Kaew herself had always warned Bell was dangerous.

And to make matters worse, the 3D gang left their slap marks, making Bell's lips swell even more—while Kaew just watched, impassively, as if it had nothing to do with her. As if Bell had never been her friend.

It was then that Bell realized the harsh truth: she had lost her first and only friend in prison. When she returned to her room, she noticed that Kaew's belongings had disappeared from where they had always been. The cracked plastic drawer was open, the mattress stripped bare—even the sheets and pillow had been taken. Bell had already suspected it, ever since she saw Kaew hurriedly gathering her things as she left for lunch.

The young woman let herself fall onto the empty mattress. Maybe it was better this way, she thought. At least she wouldn't have to put up with someone she didn't even want to talk to—or even look at for a moment. But deep down, she knew: she was alone. Again. This time, Bell allowed the tears to come. She cried silently, without fear of being seen. After all, now... it was just her.

The after-school sports field was often dominated by groups of boys who would gather to play football and work up a sweat. On more active days, they would even cause a bit of a disturbance—kicking the ball with full force without worrying about whether someone might accidentally get hit. Joe asked to swap positions with a classmate.



Exhausted, with sweat running down his back, Joe ran out to rest on the edge of the field, drinking water to cool off.

"Holy shit, is it really that level?" one of his teammates, who had stopped five minutes earlier, exclaimed involuntarily. Joe looked in the direction of the group and saw that two or three friends were gathered around a cell phone, watching something.

"Do you think she knew? I think she knew, but she let it slide."

"Yeah, it looks like she was enjoying it—look at that ecstatic face!"

"Damn, isn't she a teacher?"

Joe rolled his eyes in disgust. He knew the character of these colleagues well—especially the group that was always hunting for leaked clips or videos.

Women's secrets to share. In the worst cases, they even paid to enter exclusive groups with "special" content.

Not that Joe was a saint who never consumed adult videos.

But at the very least, he believed it should come with the consent of the people involved—not these sneaky recordings they were watching.

"You're gay, are you, Joe? Don't you want to come watch with us?" they taunted, refusing to stay quiet. They hurled every homophobic insult their limited minds could come up with, as if the world hadn't evolved beyond such nonsense. Joe held up his water bottle and pretended not to hear, but they clearly weren't going to give up that easily.

"Joe has a girlfriend, how can he be gay?"



"Girlfriend? Since when? You never told me!"

"Idiot! You really know nothing. Look at his Instagram, he only posts pictures of his wife."

The typical high school insults continued. Joe could ignore them when it was just about him, but when it turned to someone else, Joe couldn't help but look at what his classmates were doing. One of them took out his phone and opened Instagram to check if Joe really had a girlfriend.

But one of their expressions changed completely when he saw his girlfriend's photo.

"Fuck, is this really it? Are you sure?"

"Why?"

The same boy took the cell phone playing the leaked video of the secret group from his friend's hands. He swiped his finger a few times before placing the device on the table. On the screen, a video showed a girl being sexually abused; it was impossible to know if she was aware that she was being filmed. Joe almost looked away until the boy blurted out:

"Is this your girlfriend or not?"

"I've seen it so much I almost have her face memorized."

At dusk, as daylight began to fade, the alleys of the townhouse complex were bustling with activity. Walls pressed together in endless rows, sheltering a multitude of residents. Cars, motorcycles, and even bicycles belonging to mischievous children who ran at full speed, barely looking where they were going, completed the scene.



A young high school student dragged her feet back home, exhausted after a long day of studying. She had spent almost eight hours in regular classes, not counting the extra courses and tutoring sessions that were taking an even greater toll on her.

When Natty got home, it was already getting dark. Her mother was setting the table for dinner when she came in. Neither of them exchanged a word, as if it were normal, just as it always was.

Natty went upstairs to leave her backpack in her room, changed out of her school uniform into shorts, and washed her hands before going downstairs. Mom turned on the TV to watch a soap opera while they ate. They rarely talked during meals, but when they did, it was always the mother who started the conversation—and the subject almost never varied:

"You know Aunt Kan, my friend? Her daughter studies at Thammasat. Do you want me to ask her to help you with the study material?"

"I don't want to," Natty replied without hesitation.

It was always like this. Her mother loved to comment on her friends' children—always about grades, always about college. She had a lot of things to "help" with, but she almost never asked if Natty really wanted it.

"Why not? There's only a year left until the entrance exam. Who knows, maybe she can guide you on how to study, which subjects to focus on..." The mother continued, leaving no room for a second refusal.

Natty chose silence. She pushed the rice around on her plate with her cutlery, barely eating, while listening.



"You shouldn't even have to help around the house! I work hard to pay for your studies. Your only duty is to study!" The mother insisted, refusing to be silent.

It was always the same thing: unrealistic expectations about her youngest daughter, mixed with guilt trips about the "sacrifices" she made to pay for school.

"Extra classes that cost thousands per course. Think of it as an investment that could pay off in the future."

"Mom, can we visit Claire?"

A heavy silence filled the room, as if the air had been sucked out of it. The mother didn't respond. She didn't even pretend to have heard her daughter's question, as she had been doing for over a year. It was as if she had only one daughter. As if the other had never existed.

Even Claire's belongings were still there, untouched. Nothing had been thrown away.

"Mother..."

"What for?" Her mother's lips tightened, as if she were holding back her anger to keep from exploding. Natty noticed a slight tremor in her mouth before she continued:

"To this day, I can't look my neighbors in the eye. No one wants to get involved with our family because of what she did. And you still want me to visit her? I don't understand how you can be so ungrateful... Since I couldn't educate her, may jail teach her until she dies. That's what she deserves."



After dinner, Natty went upstairs to the room she had once shared with her sister. That was before Claire moved to their mother's room downstairs, claiming she needed more quiet for her sleepless nights of studying.

Natty tossed her cell phone onto the table before throwing herself onto the bed.

She lay there without bothering to shower first, even though she knew she should. Every minute lost was one less minute she could use to study math and try to catch up on her grades. And she still hadn't even started the chemistry exercises from her prep course.

By now, her classmates were probably exchanging messages in the group chat—asking for help with homework, explanations for math problems, or, in the most desperate cases, tips for memorizing formulas. Some even hoped that just scribbling the equations on the answer sheet—without actually solving them—might earn them a mercy point or two from the teacher.

Natty turned onto her side and hugged the pillow, letting her breath flow freely. Time passed—ten minutes, half an hour, maybe an hour—she couldn't tell. In that moment, all she wanted was to exist without feeling guilty for not living up to other people's expectations.

On the phone she'd left on the table, there weren't just messages from classmates asking the "exemplary student" for help. Among them, one different contact stood out:

Joe: Are you home yet?

Joe: Let me know when you get there, okay?

(1 hour ago)



Joe: I need to ask you something.

Joe: Did you study at Sarassart?

(2 minutes ago)

No matter how many times she was brought here, Claire could never get used to this place.

Her slender body, over 5'7" tall, was curled up on a hard mattress, with only a thin pillow and a blanket so light that, no matter how low the temperature dropped, it never truly warmed her. At the end of the bunk, almost against the wall, there was a toilet installed directly in the room—no door, no partition. She was forced to eat, sleep, and relieve herself in the same space.

And yes, this was the "pigsty"—solitary confinement. A place used to isolate inmates deemed dangerous or disruptive, cut off from the outside world for as long as the prison director saw fit.

Only the absolute silence, the incessant light from the overhead lamp, and the trays of food slid through the door at fixed times broke the monotony.

It was a cruelty that required no physical violence to be effective.

Few were placed in solitary confinement as a "disciplinary measure," but Claire had been chosen twice.



The first was last year, after a bloody fight with the 3D gang. Everyone knew the punishment was unfair—Claire had taken the blame alone, even though both sides were equally responsible, with injuries just as serious. But the gang had connections among the guards, hidden interests that protected them. Meanwhile, Claire was thrown into solitary confinement without hesitation.

And now, again... Claire had questioned. Demanded justice.

Aunt Phon deserved justice. At the very least, an honest explanation for her death—an acknowledgment that she had been the victim of negligence, that her illness required care she never received. But no. They denied everything. They let her life be snuffed out without even the dignity of having family by her side.

Claire never cared what would happen to her. She knew her demands for justice would probably go unheard. After all, she was locked in solitary confinement—a place where human rights were a forgotten concept. But that didn't worry her as much as... what would happen outside.

How would Natty deal with all of this without her?

These thoughts had come to her before—when Claire had wondered how her mother and sister would survive if she disappeared. But now, trapped in this place, she knew: maybe her ending here was the best thing for everyone.

And that was Claire's choice.

“Claire...”



A soft, familiar voice broke the oppressive silence, making her believe, for a moment, that her mind was betraying her. She looked up at the steel door—an impenetrable barrier that only allowed trays of food to pass through the narrow gap near the floor.

"Claire, can you hear me?"

This time, the voice echoed more clearly. It was no illusion. The lunch tray slid across the gap, as usual. But unlike the guards, who never prolonged contact, this visit had a very specific purpose.

It was Natty.

"Natty? Is that you?"

Like a single ray of light piercing the darkness that had plunged her mind into despair, Claire jumped up from the mattress and knelt in front of the narrow opening through which the food trays were passed. Her heart felt like it had leapt out of her chest when she realized who was standing on the other side.

"Yes, it's me... How are you, Claire?"

The concern was palpable in her voice, even without being able to see her through the heavy steel door and thick concrete walls. But the simple fact that Natty had managed to come—no matter how—made Claire's hardened heart, already so used to suffering, feel as if it were being embraced.

And it was then that she realized just how fragile she really was.



The pain of losing Aunt Phon, the longing for her family, the love for the one on the other side of the door—all of these feelings hit her like a wave in that very moment.

"If I said I was fine, I'd be lying... but at least I'm not shackled with chains and iron balls like in the comic books. They also didn't give me a spoon to dig a tunnel and escape with. And my uniform isn't striped black and white..."

A laugh escaped through the crack in the door, reaching Claire inside the cell. Even in that tense situation, she found humor in the references to the comic books they used to read. They both knew time was short, and at any moment, the guards could appear and interrupt their conversation.

"Hang in there a little longer. The jailer said you're close to being released."

"Out of here... but still trapped anyway. A prison within a prison."

"Again..." Claire managed to draw another laugh from those outside. She thought to herself how wonderful it would be if the two of them could talk face to face every day.

Just hearing Natty's voice was like gaining an extra breath of life in that place of confinement, where she couldn't see the sun or the moon. Her only sense of time came from the lights that went out at night and the three trays of food delivered daily—those were the only landmarks that let her guess what time it was, what shift of the day she was in.

"And you... are you okay? Has anyone been bothering you?"



Instead of Natty showing concern for Claire, it was the prisoner who asked about her sister's well-being. Claire noticed the brief silence on the other end, as if Natty were trying to come up with a lie to reassure her.

"Don't worry about me..."

"Get out of there! It's forbidden to talk to the inmates!"

A third person's voice echoed through the hallway, making Claire's heart skip a beat. Her biggest fear was that Natty would end up in trouble because of her. But the younger sister still managed to leave one last message:

"Don't forget to eat, okay? Every meal, understand?"

"You too! I'm getting out of here soon!" Claire shouted at the top of her lungs through the crack in the door, hoping Natty could still hear her.

The footsteps slowly faded away, leaving behind a hollow emptiness in her chest. Until silence—her only constant companion during all those days—once again reigned supreme in the cell.

The young man, wearing a cap and surgical mask to hide any identifying features, walked down the corridor leading to the cells, carefully scanning his surroundings. The pass he carried, granted under "special circumstances," was the result of some influential contacts and a generous sum of money that had convinced the prison guards to facilitate his access.

When he reached the visiting room, a guard opened the door for him. The room was empty—no one to disturb them.



Inside sat a young woman wearing a dull green prison uniform that, at first glance, could be mistaken for ordinary pajamas—were it not for the location.

Bell, who was already seated, frowned slightly at the sound of approaching footsteps. She had been brought in under the pretense that a “relative” had requested a special visit. At first, she had no idea who it could be—until she saw him.

It didn’t take long to recognize him. His silhouette, the designer clothes he wore... Bell knew who he was even before he removed his cap and mask.

Top sat across from his ex-girlfriend, separated by a thick glass that allowed them only glances and words through a small opening. But it was enough for him—he had insisted on seeing her in person.

“How... how are you?”

A wave of pent-up unease made Bell roll her eyes at the sound of his voice. She could barely bring herself to look at him.

Bell avoided making direct eye contact with her ex-boyfriend—perhaps out of fear he might read in her eyes all the hatred she felt.

“What happened to your face? Did someone hurt you in here? But this is a maximum-security prison! Who was it? Tell me their name, and I’ll take care of it—”

“Don’t get involved.” Bell cut him off without hesitation. Her decision had been made ever since the last time, when she had sent a lawyer to mediate a call. She felt no regret for leaving him. On the contrary—it was as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Now, she no longer had to expect anything from him.



She no longer had to feel indebted to him or his father. She could simply serve her sentence—even for a crime she hadn’t committed—in peace.

“Please let me help you, Bell! We’ll get the lawyer to file an appeal, find someone to take the blame for the crime, and then—”

“You still want someone to take the blame for me, Top? Isn’t it enough that I’m the only one?”

Bell’s voice was exhausted and exasperated, as if she couldn’t take it anymore. In the end, her ex-lover’s solution was nothing more than using influence to drag someone else into taking responsibility for a crime they didn’t commit. It was always the same story: pushing responsibility onto others—never facing it himself.

“No, Bell, it’s just... there’s someone who’s willing to take the blame voluntarily, in exchange for money. I called a friend who’s done this before—he used the same trick when he was caught driving drunk...”

“Isn’t that enough?!” Bell shouted, furious. The young man, who had been babbling until then, suddenly froze. His face went pale, and he gaped in astonishment.

“You’ve never yelled at me before.”

Bell’s voice echoed, sharp as a blade:

“The more you talk, the more pathetic you become. Haven’t you noticed? Is this how you rich sons of politicians solve your problems? How disgusting.

I’m ashamed to say this—but I don’t want anything to do with you anymore. I don’t need your help. Take your father’s money and go home. I don’t want it.”



Top tried to argue:

“Bell, how are you going to put up with this? Those marks on your face... someone hit you, didn’t they? Please, let me help. You already have a criminal record now—once you leave here, who’s going to hire you?”

Bell let out a bitter laugh.

“And wasn’t it YOUR father’s lawyer who put me here? You call it ‘help’—convincing me to confess to a crime I didn’t commit just to ‘reduce my sentence’? Enough, Top. I’m tired of you. For the last time: **GET OUT OF MY LIFE.**”

Her voice shook—not from fear, but from pure anger. She could no longer bear to hear that man’s selfish justifications.

“Could you at least listen to me? I just want to help you... get you out of here. We could start dating again. I can get you a job at my company, even with your record—”

“Dating again? It’s over, Top. Period.”

“You don’t love me anymore?”

“It’s over. There’s no feeling left. No love, no hate. Just... nothing. Please don’t force this to turn into hate.”

Bell bit back her next words. She almost said, *we’re too close to that already*, but instead, she chose to end it there—clinging to a last breath of hope that this chapter could finally close.

She just wanted peace.



Bell stood, drawing herself to her full height, and walked out of the room without a backward glance, ignoring Top's desperate pleas echoing behind her.

It was always the same story. The same conversation that should have ended long ago.

At the prison supply store, as she picked out her daily items, Bell heard Mangpor's practical advice:

"It's better to only buy what you need for the day. If you stock up, they'll steal it."

Mangpor was around the same age as Bell, but had a more masculine appearance—short hair and a firm posture. Many inmates called her a "tomboy," but she always denied it:

"I just like short hair. It's practical."

Tired of explaining her gender to others, Mangpor simply let them think what they wanted.

"And the roses you ordered that day... have they grown yet?" Mangpor asked again.

If you didn't count Claire (who was still in solitary confinement) and Aunt Phon (who had passed away), Mangpor was the only inmate Bell could still talk to. From the first day, Bell had noticed that Mangpor showed clear interest in her. But after rumors about Bell and Claire began to circulate, Mangpor started keeping her distance. After all, who wanted trouble with Claire?



“Not even a week has passed yet...”

“I tried hard to get quality seeds, you know? I even read the reviews. If they germinate...”

“Don’t forget to tell me, okay?”

The conversations between Bell and Mangpor were becoming more and more natural. Having at least one friend was better than complete loneliness.

“Claire gets out of solitary today. I still can’t believe she got so close to Aunt Phon that she confronted the warden about it... Did you know Aunt Phon wasn’t the first one to die here? They always try to cover it up, say it happened at the hospital. Anything to stop people from being scared of ghosts.”

Bell rolled her eyes.

“Ghosts? Seriously?”

She had never openly doubted those beliefs, but part of her felt that Aunt Phon was better off free—even in death—than trapped in this place. The idea that she might still be confined here after death was sadder than death itself.

Mangpor shrugged.

“There are people who believe. The director even brought in monks to perform rites of passage. It usually takes about five or seven days...”

“What about the person who shared the cell with Aunt Phon?”



"She was probably transferred. I would do the same; who would want to stay in a cell where someone died?" Mangpor replied, shrugging as she placed two packs of tampons and a tube of toothpaste into a plastic bag for Bell.

She had no idea who Aunt Phon's cellmate was—it wasn't her problem. But she noticed that Bell seemed to be thinking deeply about something.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about asking to be transferred there..."

"No, no... Just curious. An acquaintance of mine was in that cell, that's all."

Bell avoided telling the real reason for the question. She picked up her purchases, paid for with the prison system's paper vouchers, and left the store, leaving Mangpor with a puzzled look.

These vouchers came from the profits of products made in the professional training courses, lasting weeks, such as sewing and confectionery. Over time, Bell had saved some vouchers specifically to return to Kaew. She didn't want to owe any favors or let the others think there was some debt between them, as Top always insisted on reminding her. But ever since Kaew left the room, Bell hadn't had the chance to meet her alone.

Kaew now always hung out with the group Bell should most avoid: the 3D gang. It was as if she had become one of them. Among the inmate gossips, there were rumors that Kaew had been close to Didi in the past, so it was no surprise that she had returned to the group.



That same night, almost at lights-out time when all inmates were forced to sleep, Bell dragged her mattress, pillow, and blanket from the top bunk to the floor. Since her old cellmate had left and no one had replaced her, she finally had some freedom to organize her space. But then...

The sound of the lock being opened echoed through the room, even after the guard had locked everything. Bell, who was already preparing to lie down, sat up abruptly. She looked at the door, trying to understand:

Any problems out there?

Any rules you broke by accident?

The dim light from the single bulb on the ceiling barely illuminated the face of the person who entered, but it was enough for Bell to recognize who it was.

"There's only one bed left here. Come in and sleep soon; the lights will be out soon."

The guard closed the door behind them, leaving Bell to stare at her new cellmate. Could this really be the person she had worried so much about? The person who had been counting the days until she would be released from solitary confinement?

She knew Claire would be released today, but she never imagined seeing her there, in front of her as her new roommate.

Claire was standing, a backpack on her shoulders and a box of belongings already placed on the plastic locker. She ran her hand over the back of her neck, hesitant, before breaking the silence:

"I... sleep on the top bunk, right?"



Before Claire could even finish her sentence, the smaller figure on the mattress stood up and wrapped her in a hug so tight it nearly knocked her over, as if just seeing her wasn't proof enough that she was really there.

Claire stood still, her hands hesitantly hovering in the air before slowly wrapping around Bell in response. Something strange and warm was building in her chest, and her heart, which had been beating wildly since the moment she recognized who was in the cell, now seemed to want to escape through her throat.

"Lights out in five minutes!"

The harsh warning from the guard in the hallway separated them. Claire pretended to busy herself with packing her belongings, her fingers trembling slightly as she folded a T-shirt.

Claire left her backpack on the floor so she could organize her belongings the next day. But when she turned and saw Bell sitting on the bed, clearly waiting for her, her hands resting on her sides in silent invitation, something in her chest tightened.

With anyone else, Claire would have ignored it. She wasn't the type to follow orders, especially not from someone smaller and more fragile. She would have gone straight to the top bunk and pretended to sleep.

But this was Bell.

The same Bell who could tame the fiercest dogs in the kennel with a single look.

So Claire sat down next to her on the lower mattress, leaning against the wall so they were hidden in the darkest corner of the cell, away from the eyes of the guards who patrolled the corridors every hour.



Within seconds, the prison lights went out simultaneously, as they did punctually every night. The definitive sign that all inmates were to sleep without conversation, without noise.

In the absolute darkness of the dull gray-painted cell, it was impossible to see anything with the naked eye. Only after a few minutes, when the eyes began to adapt, did the shapes of the surrounding objects become faintly visible.

"How are you, Claire?"

Bell whispered so quietly that only the bodies pressed into that corner could hear.

"I'm... fine. Just being out of there is enough."

Short answer. No description of how destructive solitary confinement was, how each day in there sucked out every last drop of will to live.

"I continue to take care of the roses we planted. They haven't grown yet... we need to wait a little longer."

Claire made a sound between a laugh and a sigh, barely moving her lips. Her eyes, already adapted to the darkness, could now discern the figure of the person beside her.

"Thank you... But what about you? Have you been taking care of yourself too? It's no use just taking care of the roses, you know?"



Bell let out a muffled laugh. Perhaps out of instinct, or because the short distance between them allowed even furtive glances to be seen, she turned her head. Her eyes met Claire's in the darkness.

And even though Claire's poor vision in the dim light served as an alibi, preventing her from noticing the blush on Bell's face, she still found herself completely disarmed by that presence. Bell leaned forward, as if the already tiny distance between them was still too much.

"Of course I take care of myself. I'm afraid you'll go out and not find me here."

Claire smiled in the dark, her face so close that Bell could feel the warmth of her breath: "There's only one way I won't find you here: the day you serve your sentence."

The words sounded like a distant dream—almost impossible in the real world. But the fact that Claire said them meant she truly believed them.

In that prison, most women served sentences of up to five years, unless they were charged with murder... Cases like Claire's, who faced a sentence of thirteen years—enough time to make her lose everything she had out there. For society, perhaps even a life sentence would not be enough. But for Claire...

Thirteen years was too long. Too long to wait. Too long to love. Too long to live.

"So many things I'll miss out on... I won't see my sister get into the university of her dreams, or graduate, or build a career... And I'll still be here."



But now, there was a new regret hammering in Claire's chest:

"When Bell serves her sentence and gets out... I'll still be locked up for years. Years until we see each other again."

"Was that a declaration of love... without saying 'I love you'?"

Claire gasped in the dark:

"What? No! I mean... it's not like that... but... eh..."

Caught off guard by the provocation, Claire was so disconcerted that Bell couldn't help but smile again, which she saw perfectly, even in the darkness, in that space that could no longer be called "distance."

"Are you... flirting with me?"

Bell whispered, so quietly that the words were almost lost in the air.

First, so that the patrolling guards wouldn't hear.

Second, and this was more likely, coming from the cunning Bell because a whisper in that darkness had the power to start uncontrolled heartbeats in anyone who heard it.

Claire choked:

"I thought you liked men..."

"And I do. But that doesn't mean I can't like other genders too."

"You mean... bisexual?" Claire repeated the term she had heard before, trying to understand it.

Bell shook her head, but Claire could no longer see the movement in the dark.



With a barely noticeable smile curving her lips as she lowered her eyes, Bell whispered:

"Pansexual, not bisexual. For bisexuals, gender matters, male or female. But for me..."

She paused, choosing her words carefully:

"When I like someone, gender is not a factor. It could be male, female, non-binary... If the connection is there, that's what matters. It's not confusion or that cliché of 'genderless love.' It's simply..."

Bell took a deep breath, her eyes meeting Claire's in the darkness.

"It's just someone who makes me feel something special. And that someone... could very well be you."

Claire stood still, processing each word. When she finally spoke, her voice was softer than ever.

"So... do I make you feel something special?"

Bell chuckled softly, the warm sound echoing in the tiny space between them.

"What do you think?"

"Then... I'll allow myself to assume the best."

The distance between their faces was already minimal from the start. Claire could feel the heat of Bell's breath caressing her skin as, with slow movements, she tilted her face until the tip of her sharp nose lightly brushed Bell's—a touch so subtle it sent shivers down her spine.



And when the shorter girl's lips lifted to meet hers in a soft kiss, Claire realized she wasn't the only one consumed by desire. Bell was also there, whole, at that moment.

Claire's calloused hands, scarred from years of hard labor, cupped Bell's delicate face. They parted for only an instant before meeting again, at a deeper angle.

Claire savored those soft lips over and over again, her heart pounding so hard it felt like it wanted to escape.

Claire's heart felt like it wanted to explode when she heard the soft moan that escaped Bell's throat in response to the kiss. The shorter girl's delicate hands grabbed Claire's dull green uniform, as if looking for something to hold on to, but ended up tightening the fabric involuntarily, as a way to release the tension that grew with each more intense movement of Claire's.

Claire barely noticed when her own hands, restless and curious, began to slide downward. It was only when Bell made a choked sound somewhere between a moan and a sigh that she realized her fingers had already found the warm skin beneath her uniform.

And just as they were about to rise even higher, almost touching Bell's unprotected breasts, the smaller girl intercepted her wrists with surprising firmness.

"Wait... we can't."

Bell's voice was a hoarse whisper, but her eyes made it clear, even in the dark:

They were already going too far, to a place where they could be discovered at any moment.



"Today you can't..."

Bell pulled away from the kiss with a soft whisper, but Claire could feel the heat of her quickened breathing. Her half-lidded eyes stared at Bell with an expression of confusion and suppressed desire. "What's wrong? Why stop now?"

Bell responded with another brief kiss, this time on Claire's chin and jawline, as if to calm her down.

"I'm on my period. It wouldn't be... hygienic. Another day, okay?"

Despite her obvious frustration and doubt that she could control herself, Claire understood immediately. She didn't insist, she didn't beg.

The two rearranged themselves for sleep. As Claire prepared to climb onto the top bunk, however, Bell tugged firmly on her arm.

"Stay down here with me."

Claire wouldn't resist this invitation, even if the world were ending.

Claire's arm became Bell's pillow—infinately softer and warmer than the hard foam of the prison. And so, with ease, she pulled the girl's slender body closer, enveloping her in an embrace that seemed to have molded them for each other.

It didn't take long for their breathing to synchronize, slow and steady, a clear sign that they had fallen asleep. No weight disturbed them at that moment. Only a rare peace, stolen from a system that would never give them a break.



Chapter 7

The Confession

A high-speed internet cafe in the heart of a teenage hangout.

After school, it was common to see groups of students playing on computers, machines that, they said, had powerful hardware, and made to please gamers.

Joe was one of those high school kids who always showed up with his friends. After hours of nonstop gaming, hands nimble on the mouse, fingers dancing on the keyboard without rest, one of his friends asked for a ten-minute break to eat something before returning to the gaming marathon.

Joe didn't go with them. He asked them to bring a hotdog with melted cheese and a soda, while he kept an eye on everyone's backpacks. The young man left the screen of the shooting game that only starts with a full team of five players and picked up the cell phone that was face down, checking if anyone had sent a message.

He found a message from his girlfriend, saying that she had been on her way to tutoring since thirty minutes ago.

The boy slid his finger to unlock the screen and replied, telling what he was doing. Of course, he would have to wait until Natty left class to receive an answer.



Meanwhile, Joe yawned loudly and began scrolling through old messages between him and his girlfriend, who had studied at another school back then, until he found a question that Natty had answered days ago.

Joe: "Have you ever studied at Sarassart School?"

Natty: "Hmm, yes."

Several hours passed before Joe received a response that did not alleviate his doubts.

The boy, however, decided not to pressure her when he realized, from the dry and evasive tone of the messages that she did not want to talk about the subject. Even with his heart restless, he avoided bringing up the subject again.

The sexual abuse video his friend showed him, featuring a girl with a face vaguely similar to Natty's, was hard to identify clearly. The image, only a few seconds long, didn't confirm that it was really her. But her school uniform matched the one from the old school he had just mentioned.

However... Whoever the girl in the video was, whoever filmed it secretly and leaked it was a disgusting monster. A criminal who violated a minor's privacy deserved to rot in jail, chained up like the trash he was.

In the videos, it was impossible to identify who the man in any of them was. There was only speculation in the comments that it could be a teacher who had lured the girl into abusing her. The more Joe thought about it, the more his heart sank in anguish.



His right hand moved the mouse, opening a new tab to search for more information. He typed:

"Sarassart Secondary School"

He went through pages on the Education Ministry's website—institutional news, activities, awards—until...

"It's Sarassart, right?"

A news story from a month ago caught his attention:

"Teacher stabbed inside school"

Dated June 23, 2023, the article didn't name the school, as if there had been a gag order on the information. But Joe saw the tags on Twitter, where people were commenting... and everything pointed to that school.

Joe clicked to read, with more urgency than when he was aiming at enemies in the game. His eyes scanned the online forum rapidly, where hundreds of users were discussing the case. The more he read, the wider his eyes grew, his breath turning shallow.

The gist of the news was that the attacker had stabbed a teacher in the computer lab, leaving him with dozens of wounds.

That alone made Joe feel like he'd seen this report before—last year.

He opened another tab and searched again:

"Claire, 19 stab wounds"

A name that echoed across all news channels for months after the brutal crime. Yet no outlet had ever mentioned the name of the school. Little by little, Joe began to piece together everything that had been covered up.



He let out a breath he didn't even know he was holding.

"Krapat Kunthalak."

The killer's name, along with the details of the crime and the location, all matched perfectly. But then Joe saw the full name of the criminal published on a news website—and an involuntary gasp escaped his lips.

Because Natty's full name was...

"Kranit Kunthalak."

And, to make matters worse, the article made it clear:

"The killer claimed she stole the school's computers to sell because her family was in debt and had no income. She broke into the school where her younger sister studied... before committing the crime."

"So far, you still don't know whose methamphetamine it was?"

Claire questioned it almost instantly after hearing the story of how someone so fragile had ended up in prison.

What do you mean? Bell had never been involved with drugs—no history of buying or selling—and the toxicology tests had come back negative. But due to pure bureaucracy, since the amount seized exceeded the legal limit, she was charged with the same severity as a drug dealer.



And the worst part? The drugs weren't even hers.

"I have no idea," Bell replied. "My lawyer said there's no way to prove who touched the package... and he pressured me to confess to 'lighten' the sentence."

"The lawyer didn't even try to fight your case? How can he be so irresponsible?" Claire couldn't hide the indignation she felt toward Bell's situation.

The two had stepped outside to talk, now occupying a concrete bench under the shade of a large tree that shielded them from the weak late afternoon sun. The spot resembled an old high school cheerleading stand. Claire explained that the prison administration often reused these areas during annual sporting events.

Ahead of them, groups of inmates were engaged in various activities—some playing badminton with rackets loaned by the guards, laughing loudly and momentarily relieving the constant tension of prison life. Others were saving up money to order food from outside, negotiating with the guards.

From her seat, Claire watched a circle of four or five inmates sitting on a marble bench, greedily devouring som tam plara nam pu, larb, nam tok, sticky rice, and grilled chicken—a rare feast they savored as if it were their last meal.

At least these small moments of normalcy helped ease the longing for life outside: eating whatever they wanted, playing badminton when they felt like it...

But none of it replaced what they really wanted—the day they could finally return to their families and the ones they loved, beyond these walls.



"In fact, he was my ex's lawyer. It was my ex who sent him to help me... while he himself, who was with me at the bar that night, wasn't charged with anything."

Bell finally decided to tell everything. It had been weeks since she'd found anyone she could truly unburden herself to. Before, Kaew was the one who used to listen—and sometimes even shared some of her own stories—but only up to a point. Now, Bell felt a bitter kind of relief that she hadn't told Kaew everything she'd been through...

"How do you define yourself? Because I don't know if Kaew would go around spreading it..."

Especially now that Kaew was getting involved with the 3D gang.

Unlike Kaew, Claire—standing at 1.70 meters—was an exceptional listener. Someone Bell knew would never betray her trust. Claire offered unconditional support first, and only then would she share her opinion, always without judging Bell's choices, even when they weren't the best. That alone made Bell feel like, after everything, she still had someone by her side.

"You said you like men, right?"

"Yes, that's true. I've dated women... and even a tomboy in high school, when I went to an all-girls school. But my last relationship, in college, was with a man. In the end, I define myself as pan, because for me, gender has never mattered. I just need to feel good about the person."

She wasn't just saying it. The pretty young woman turned to look at the one beside her, leaning her shoulder against Claire's—as if to erase any space between them. It was the kind of gesture typical of couples in love, especially those still



discovering each other, like after the night they'd confessed their feelings and exchanged kisses that had nearly gone beyond the limits of friendship.

From that moment on, they no longer worried about hiding their affection in public. The other inmates had even gotten used to the affectionate scenes between them. Some made jokes, but they were already tired of hearing Claire's standard response:

"Get a pretty girlfriend, and the envy will go away."

And so they went on, challenging stares and spreading a little human warmth inside those cold walls.

"And... your parents? What did they think of you being here?"

The question had barely left Claire's lips before she regretted it. What a senseless thing to ask. No mother or father would be happy to see their child behind bars—tarnishing the family name and losing their future. And when she saw the flicker in Bell's eyes dim like a candle in the wind, Claire wished more than anything she could take the words back.

"My parents are already dead."

The answer only deepened the guilt in Claire's chest.

Before, she had never cared much about other people's lives—who lived or died. It had always been of little interest to her. But after what happened with Aunt Phon... and now with Bell... these two people had made Claire feel something new:

A fierce desire to protect them like a treasure.



"Sorry for asking..."

"It's okay, go ahead and ask. I don't mind."

Even though Bell tried to hide it with a light tone, it was obvious that something had shifted. Still, she went on:

"My father passed away shortly before I graduated. He had lung cancer, and we only discovered it when it was already in the final stage. In a way, we were lucky... because it was during the pandemic, so I was able to take online classes and take care of him until the end."

Claire sensed the pain woven into those words. She'd made the mistake of speaking without thinking before—and that time, Bell had completely broken down, sobbing until she was breathless, all her anguish pouring out at once.

It was a painful memory. That fragile girl, who, even after losing both her parents, still tried to be strong and independent...

"Landing a stable job and supporting yourself to this day... that's already amazing."

Bell looked down, her nostrils twitching slightly. Claire almost interrupted her—would reliving that memory only hurt her more?

But Bell continued, keeping her voice steady:

"My mother... she died when I was a child. An accident."

And then came the most painful part of her story:

"I was thirteen. My parents had promised to take me to see the New Year's fireworks... but that night, my father was called away on an emergency and couldn't go. I cried for hours, locked in the bathroom, refusing to eat. Eventually, my mother took me—just the two of us."



Bell's calloused hands—marked by years of labor without rest—reached out and gently clasped Claire's thin, delicate fingers. She smiled faintly, as if to say:

"Don't worry. I want to tell you this. It doesn't hurt like it used to."

"On the way back... Mom was walking me across the street to our car, which was parked on the other side. Suddenly, a speeding car hit us. That's all I remember. When I woke up, I was already in the hospital. Mom... she died instantly. They said she took the full impact in my place. That's why I survived. But do you know the most ironic part?"

Bell sniffed, trying to force a light tone at the end of her sentence, as if telling a joke. But her red eyes, on the verge of tears, betrayed the pain.

"I only recently found out... that the man who ran us over was imprisoned right here. He must've already served his sentence and is living freely out there. And now... I'm the one who ended up in this place."

It wasn't a joke, no matter how Bell tried to make it sound. Even with her fragile smile, as if fate hadn't already crushed her—first taking her mother in a tragic accident, then her father, and now leaving her behind bars, with no one waiting for her on the outside.

Claire reached out, brushing away the strands of brown hair the wind had blown across Bell's face. Her fingers passed gently through the soft locks—a silent caress, as if she could erase Bell's pain with that simple gesture.



"Many of them here are in their 40s, 50s... most pleaded guilty to drug crimes to protect their children or grandchildren. Some were tricked into opening bank accounts for drug dealers without even knowing it. When the police traced the deposits, they ended up here."

It was the longest sentence Claire had ever said to anyone. Her sharp, hawk-like eyes scanned the courtyard, where the inmates were still filling the air with laughter.

"Others came because they had no one left outside... and here, at least, they have three meals a day."

"But in the most serious cases... some people are tricked into taking the blame. Some get paid. Others get nothing. Aunt Phon once told me about a case like that..."

Claire lowered her voice, as if sharing a secret:

"It was similar to yours, Bell. A former cellmate of hers was convicted for a fatal hit-and-run... but she wasn't the real culprit. She took the blame for someone else—I think it was a politician."

She was repeating the story she'd once heard from Aunt Phon. It was a second-hand account that might've been distorted over time, but the essence was clear:

"The woman was a secretary and was having an affair with the politician. On the day of the accident, she was in the car with him... but when the police arrived, he had vanished. And she, foolishly, agreed to be the scapegoat."

"She was just doing her job—riding with her boss, like usual. But he was drunk, barely able to hold the steering wheel... still, he insisted on driving fast. Until he ended up hitting someone."



The incident was eerily similar to what had happened to Bell as a child. Traffic accidents were common—especially those caused by drunk drivers who left trails of destruction behind them.

"When the police showed up, he knew it would ruin his campaign. So he begged the secretary to switch seats with him. He promised to take care of everything, said he'd help her with the case, even claimed he'd divorce his wife and marry her... He used that as bait."

Claire paused, letting the moment hang for effect, before delivering the final blow:

"But as soon as she was arrested in his place, the man disappeared. He didn't even post bail."

It was a story that hit too close to home for Bell. Top and his father had done the same—they tricked her, made empty promises, sent a lawyer... and left her to rot alone behind bars. And yet, just a few days ago, Top had the audacity to show up again, asking for reconciliation, swearing he'd help her.

Bell no longer believed a word he said.

"When she finally threatened to expose everything—and she still had evidence that could destroy him—you know what happened?"

Claire bit her lip lightly before continuing, her voice low, carrying a heavy darkness:

"Aunt Phon found her hanging from the bunk bed, a towel tied around her neck. She was already dead when they discovered her... purple tongue, no chance of saving her."



"How horrible..." Bell, who had been silent until then, finally let out her reaction, shaken by the brutal end to the woman's story.

It was scary how the case echoed hers—a politician who ran someone over and made someone else pay for the crime. The same story, only with an even crueler ending.

"The people here are scarier than you can imagine. There's no way of knowing the power some prisoners hold—complicity with the guards, or even support from influential relatives on the outside. If there's any way out of here, I want it to—"

"Cell inspection in ten minutes! Everyone return to your seats now!"

The morning at the prison was chaotic. Rumors were spreading that drugs had been smuggled in, hidden in various ways: in the clothing of inmates returning from court, in objects brought in by corrupt officials, or even inside food packages delivered by visitors.

Porsche knew deep down that this was just a palliative—a superficial solution to a much deeper problem.

Orders from above had been clear: search every cell and inspect the inmates' bodies meticulously, without exception. Nothing would be overlooked—not bandages, underwear seams, or even the anal canal. All personal belongings were to be searched, as drugs could be hidden in the most unexpected places: sachets of fabric softener, shampoo bottles, or anything else that criminal creativity could dream up.



But Porsche knew the game. No matter how many drugs were confiscated or how many inmates were punished, it would all return eventually.

The real bosses—the ones who profited from the drug trade inside the prison—would stay relaxed in their offices, just waiting for the right moment to start the business again. It was a vicious cycle, and Porsche was tired of being just a pawn in this dirty game.

He remembered the day his father told him about the illegal products sold in the prison cafeteria: drugs, cigarettes, thinner... His father spoke of it as if it were normal. "Everyone does it to survive."

But Porsche couldn't sleep that night, haunted by the revelation. Meanwhile, his father slept soundly, without a shred of guilt, even though he knew it was wrong.

Once more than half of the cells had been searched, Porsche delegated the task of inspecting the inmates to the female officers. Meanwhile, he inspected the living quarters himself, going as far as checking behind posters on the walls.

No suspicious items hidden in the corners. "Approved." With a nod, he led the guards to the next cell.

This time, it was Claire and Bell's.

The couple had become the talk of the prison, with rumors circulating that they were acting like "newlyweds," practically inseparable. The two cooperated with the search, stepping aside so the guards could do their job. Claire, of course, maintained her usual expression of disdain for the world—but even she couldn't resist...



Porsche let the officers search the inmates and entered the cell, inspecting every corner with the same rigor as before. That's when he noticed:

Two pillows.

Two blankets.

Both of them huddled together on the bottom bunk, while the top bunk remained untouched, as if it had never been used. There was no longer any doubt that the two were a couple—in every sense.

But that wasn't what mattered.

Porsche continued his search for drugs, checking every corner until something caught his eye: a tube of toothpaste.

It was out of place, thrown on a plastic shelf, while everything else around it was impeccably organized. Someone in the cell clearly had meticulous habits... or this was no simple oversight.

He picked up the tube. It looked new, still sealed. But when he squeezed it... nothing came out. Instinct kicked in. Using a box cutter from his pocket, Porsche cut the tube in half.

Inside were white crystals, compacted like crushed ice.

Damn. He tipped the tube over a cloth, letting the evidence spill out before the agents' eyes. Claire and Bell froze, pupils dilated.

"Concrete evidence! Possession of methamphetamine. There's no denying it!"

One of the agents spoke in a triumphant voice, as if he had expected this all along. He cast an accusing look directly at Bell.



"It's obvious! She's already here for drug possession. Some people never change, right?"

The mocking voice came from among the other inmates who had already been searched. When Porsche turned, he saw **Didi**—grinning with an air of superiority, like she'd just won something.

Just moments earlier, everyone had been tense, wondering whose cell would be next. But in the end, as always, it was the “repeat offenders” who didn’t escape.

"It's not mine! This isn't mine!" Bell denied firmly, turning to Claire for support—but her partner looked just as shocked as she was.

Around them, the voices of other inmates began to rise, mockery cutting through the tension without shame:

"Claire, your girlfriend's a drug dealer, huh?"

"Have you tried it? Give us a review—how's the vibe?"

"SILENCE!"

Porsche shouted for the first time, his voice drowning out all others. The room fell into instant silence. Gone was the shy, uncertain officer from when he first arrived. Now, his eyes were locked on Bell—not just accused, but incriminated by evidence that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.



The girl shook her head, her eyes filled with disbelief. Then, unexpectedly, Claire stepped forward, positioning herself protectively in front of her smaller partner.

Her face showed no emotion, but there was an unshakable resolve in her eyes.

"It's mine. Bell has nothing to do with it."

Claire's confession came in a steady, smooth voice—without a tremor that might betray it as a lie. The silence around them grew heavier. No one had expected that.

She pressed on, challenging the logic of the accusation:

"We share a cell. Why is she the only one being blamed? Bell's been here for so long and never had a drug problem... until I got here. Isn't it obvious whose shit this is?"

"Oh, stop! Are you playing the heroine now?" Didi snapped, sharpening her words like a knife.

"Everyone knows Bell has dealt drugs before. Just a few days ago, she even had a visitor from abroad... who's to say it wasn't to receive drugs?"

"You're inventing connections that don't exist just to support your narrative!"

But Didi was suddenly silenced when the prison director's son raised his voice again:

"I already ordered silence, didn't I? So why are people still shouting like I'm not here?"

His voice was firm and commanding, without a trace of fear. Didi, used to always getting her way, was visibly irritated that things weren't going according to her plan.



The young officer then turned his attention to the two inmates in front of him. Claire feigned indifference, though she knew Bell wouldn't approve of her taking the fall.

Everyone noticed. Even Didi.

But Porsche didn't take sides. Instead, he declared with authority:

"Until proven guilty, neither of you is exonerated nor convicted. And as long as I'm here, no one will make accusations without evidence."

"This brand of toothpaste is sold in the prison canteen. I'll check if Krapat or Lalita bought any tubes—since it's a relatively exclusive item."

He paused deliberately, locking eyes with Didi. But his next words were clearly directed at someone else:

"It could be a contraband item used for illegal sales in here."

Didi averted her gaze, trying not to look suspicious. She had already complained to Director Vichai multiple times about how his son was interfering with her drug operations. Vichai had always promised to "talk" to Porsche, but the young man only seemed to grow more resolute.

Almost as if being the director's son gave him carte blanche to challenge anyone.



"As for Krapat and Lalita, I will be holding this item as evidence for further analysis. For now, no charges will be filed until we have conclusive results."

As soon as he finished, Porsche left with the other guards to continue the search, completely ignoring whether his decision had caused discomfort or distrust. Not even Claire and Bell believed they would have escaped that situation unscathed.

But what they didn't know was that the end result would be completely different from what they had expected, leaving those who had orchestrated the trap to swallow their anger in silence.

The Sukhumvit train was taking the young student towards the commercial heart of the city. It was peak time in the late afternoon, when students and workers filled the carriages, creating a sea of bodies squeezed together, even with the constant coming and going of passengers at each station.

Natty had found a spot near one of the pillars, close to the door. Her wireless headphones kept her from the outside noise, immersing her in her own playlist.

But this immersion came at a price: she didn't notice the eyes fixed on her.

A man about ten years older, with the appearance of a typical office worker, was watching her. Glasses, a light blue dress shirt, cream-colored shoes, and brown leather shoes. Everything about him screamed "ordinary, harmless man."



It was just that... something was terribly wrong. His behavior was brazen.

Natty tried to convince herself that it was just a coincidence—maybe he wasn't really looking at her, or maybe he wasn't intentionally rude. But when the train stopped at a station, she moved to a more empty space, out of his line of sight.

Only... he approached.

He left his original spot and walked toward her, grabbing a handle to get even closer—close enough that Natty felt her discomfort growing. She didn't know what he wanted, but she knew she couldn't ignore the situation. She had been through something like this before.

Hands shaking, she picked up her phone and typed a message to the only person who could help her right now.

"Joe... I'm on the train. There's a man following me. Will you please meet me at the station?"

As she pressed "send," Natty noticed the man smiling at her—a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Each second felt like an eternity.

The man raised his cell phone repeatedly, as if he were secretly taking pictures of her. Natty was forced to look away, bending over to escape the camera's angle. She hated herself for not having the courage to cry out for help.



She was afraid of being judged, called "dramatic" or "paranoid," like last time, when no one defended her.

When the train finally arrived at Siam, a busy station, Natty took advantage of the heavy flow of passengers to get lost in the crowd. She blended in, hoping to lose the man.

She didn't dare look back.

Instead, she hurried her steps, heading straight to the meeting point with her boyfriend. A place full of people was safer...

...or at least that was what she wanted to believe.

"Here, at least, no one would dare do anything." Or at least, that's what she thought.

Suddenly, "Miss?"

The same man with glasses and a blue shirt intercepted her path, an overly polite smile plastered on his face:

"Can I have your Instagram?"

"I don't have Instagram," Natty lied. It was her standard response to strangers. Her eyes darted back and forth, searching for someone who would notice her desperation.

"Facebook? Twitter?" he insisted, moving closer.

"I don't use social media." Her voice was shaking.

That was when it hit her: his eyes dropped to the school emblem on her uniform, as if he were memorizing the details. Natty clutched her backpack to her chest, using it as a makeshift shield.



Inside, she was almost begging for silent help. There was a lump in her throat, tightening more and more, but all she felt was sick.

"I know you! You've been famous lately!"

The man with glasses spoke with disturbing enthusiasm, as if he had met a celebrity. His eyes scanned her body with a shine that made Natty nauseous.

"At first, I even thought it was someone else, because of the different uniform... but my friend confirmed that it's you!"

Every word he said made her feel a growing nausea. She prayed that he was mistaken or that she had heard him wrong.

"Can you give me your Instagram? That way we can chat..."

It was then that a voice saved her:

"Natty."

Joe appeared at her side, his gaze fixed on the man like a silent warning. The stranger took a step back, his fake smile fading.

Joe placed himself firmly between Natty and the stranger, physically blocking the man's advance. He had arrived in time—thanks to her message—but not in time to prevent the situation from escalating.

The man, however, did not back away. Instead, he laughed with a hoarse sound, as if he had deciphered something:

"Oh, you there. Don't pretend you've never seen the video, kid. Everyone has!"

His eyes flashed with wicked pleasure before he continued:



"The video of your girlfriend with her teacher. How come you've never seen it, huh?"

Joe exploded.

"Stop talking about her like that, you piece of shit! You think everyone is disgusting like you?"

"Joe, stop! It's not worth it..."

Natty grabbed her boyfriend's arm tightly, preventing him from resorting to violence. A physical attack there could have resulted in legal trouble—and the screams were enough to attract judgmental looks from passersby. To strangers, it just looked like a student fighting with an adult.

The man, taking advantage of the distraction, spat out his last poisonous words:

"If you've never seen the video, tell your friends... don't miss out on the trending."

Joe exploded once more, shouting for the entire terminal to hear:

"Go watch it with your dad, you piece of shit!"

The predator, disguised as a common citizen, finally retreated, head lowered under the weight of the gazes that now faced him. The crowd began to gather, curious people trying to understand the commotion.

Joe was still breathing heavily, his fists clenched, but now restrained by Natty's touch.



Joe turned to Natty, his eyes scanning every inch of her face for signs.

She kept her head down, her trembling fingers twisting the hem of her school uniform as she confessed in a barely audible voice:

"These videos... have you seen any? Tell me where they are... please."

Only when her panic began to dissipate did Joe take her to a café in the mall, choosing an empty corner away from prying eyes.

They both skipped the intensive physics course they had to take with hundreds of other students.

"We'll make up the lessons later," he murmured, his hands wrapping around hers on the table. The important thing now was to rebuild the pieces that the parasite had tried to rip away.

Today, Natty didn't have the mind to study. The problem wasn't just the harassment on the subway; it was also the video the man had mentioned. Joe knew exactly where that story came from.

He sifted through the news from the previous year, searching for clues. Most outlets just mentioned: "Krapat Kunthalak, the murderer who stabbed a teacher in the computer room." Few mentioned the region of Bangkok where the school was located. Almost none revealed that the killer was a former student at the school and had a younger sister who still studied there.

That confirmed everything. The criminal was Natty's older sister.



But how the hell would a video of her be linked to this?

"And the physical harassment... did that happen before?"

Joe knew Natty wasn't ready to talk about everything—she still acted like she'd never studied at Sarassart School. And it made sense: Who would go around telling people their sister was imprisoned for murder? He avoided mentioning the video again, afraid it would hurt her more. But then...

"If I tell you everything... do you promise you won't hate me?"

Natty's voice was steadier than he expected, even with a slight tremor. It wasn't a question of whether to speak, but a fear that Joe wouldn't be able to handle the truth and would abandon her. But she couldn't carry this burden alone anymore.

Joe always respected her boundaries.

He knew that two students shouldn't overdo it in public, so he simply gently wrapped his hands around hers in a silent gesture. "I'm here, no matter what you reveal."

Natty began to speak, choosing each word carefully:

"I... I studied at Sarassart. The video must really be of me. And there are probably other girls in it."

She paused, her eyes fixed on the table.

"The teacher who died... he was handsome. The kind all the girls liked. And he used that to get close to us." Joe squeezed her hand tighter whenever he saw her expression waver but didn't interrupt her.



In some of the news he had found, there were photos of the dead teacher. The charming smile in the pictures now seemed like an empty mask.

Some articles even included tributes from people who mourned the professor's death.

"Methasit Yuttanawi, approximately 40 years old, but with a youthful and always impeccable appearance, a charming, elegant, and popular man among the students."

When he saw the photos, Joe would never have imagined that face was hiding a predator who secretly filmed female students.

Natty continued, her voice breaking in places:

"I had private lessons with him after school. Small groups for only the 'best students,' he said. He gave me test tips... At first, I even fell for his charm. The closer he got, the worse it got. I played with him for months, until..."

She held her breath for a moment, as if struggling to continue.

"There have been situations where he filmed secretly..., but it had never gone any further. I was afraid. Until, the last time, he insisted so much that I... I..."

Joe quickly grabbed a handkerchief from the table and handed it to Natty, but she didn't take it. Her thin lips pressed together so tightly that they turned white. At least her hands were busy like this, she couldn't scratch her palms until they bled, like she usually did when she relived those memories.

Memories that would never leave her.



"Was it your sister who saved you?" Joe ventured a guess. Deep down, he knew the answer was linked to that. Even he—who was not part of the family, who had not grown up with them—was seething with rage at the thought of a teacher who abused his authority to prey on female students.

It was wrong in every way.

Violation of the code of ethics for teachers, a crime of child abuse, a complete failure in the moral discernment expected of an adult, especially from someone who could be the father of those students.

Joe was seething with indignation. Even though he understood Natty's sister's crime, part of him justified the murder.

But then...

Natty shook her head.

A solitary tear fell onto her navy blue uniform before she whispered,

"I was the one who killed him... He died because of me. My sister just took the blame. It all happened because... because I did it."

That same night, behind the high walls of the prison, while the world outside lived in freedom, inside the cells, the lights went out at a set time. The sound of distant snoring and the muffled hum of fans created a stuffy but familiar atmosphere—the normal routine of every night.



Except for Bell.

She couldn't sleep. Her eyes remained open in the darkness, no matter how hard she tried to close them. Lying on her side, her frail figure faced away from Claire, not out of spite, but out of habit.

And Claire, as always, wrapped her arms around her, protecting her even in the dark.

Ever since that night they confessed their feelings, Bell and Claire had shared the bottom bunk. They had kissed, touched, and almost crossed all the limits, but they stopped when Bell's period came.

From then on, they were rarely apart.

But the incident that day—the drug hidden in the toothpaste tube—left Bell disturbed. She knew many inmates hated her, but the list of suspects would be as long as the road from Bangkok to Chonburi.

If she were convicted of drug possession a second time, the sentence would be much harsher.

Bell let out a deep sigh. At least the agent had been reasonable, taking the "evidence" for analysis. Otherwise, she and Claire would be screwed, and Claire might end up in solitary confinement again—especially if some guard decided to take "justice" into their own hands.

"Can't you sleep either?"

Claire muttered from behind, tightening her grip around Bell's waist. It was obvious that she, too, had tried to close her eyes for hours but had lost the battle against insomnia.



Bell turned slowly.

"Claire..."

"Hmm?" Claire replied with a husky sound in her throat, resting her forehead on Bell's shoulder like a needy puppy.

Bell swallowed hard before whispering:

"Next time... don't offer to take the blame for me, okay? I don't want you to..."

Her voice trailed off, swallowed by the fear of imagining Claire in solitary confinement again, or worse.

"I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

Bell kept her voice steady, hoping that this time Claire would hear her. She knew Claire wasn't the type to obey anyone—in fact, she feared almost nothing. But Bell was her exception.

Claire shrugged, downplaying the danger:

"It's okay. I'll be here for years anyway... A drug case won't make things much worse."

Bell almost shivered.

"It's just a drug case? I've been here for 15 months because of that 'just a drug case' you say. And you don't think about leaving? Do you want to stay strapped here forever, do you?"

There was a mix of irony and frustration in her words. She hated that Claire treated everything as if it weren't serious. Taking on other people's blame—even if half of the inmates were there for that—wasn't something that Bell would welcome with open arms.

Claire sighed, her fingers tracing circles on Bell's wrist.



"It's not that... It's just that you still have a future out there. You deserve to get out before me."

Bell turned sharply, staring at Claire with a look that mixed disapproval and concern, like a father facing a stubborn child.

"I know you want to help. But everyone must take responsibility for their own actions!" Her voice hissed in the darkness. "The drug wasn't mine... but it wasn't yours either. Stop sacrificing yourself for nothing!"

In Claire's eyes, which Bell could see even in the darkness, she saw something rare:

A fleeting vulnerability.

The same one that had appeared months ago, when Bell had vented all her anger in Claire's lap. Back then, Claire had absorbed every word without defending herself. Now, however...

"Actually..." Claire's voice sounded hoarse and strange, as if it didn't belong to her. She lowered her eyes, carrying a weight she had never shared.

"I took the blame for my younger sister. That's why I'm here."

That revelation—coming from someone everyone had called a murderer a year ago—left Bell paralyzed. It was as if the ground had vanished beneath her feet.

The whole story she had believed was a lie.



"So... you didn't kill the professor?" Bell asked, her voice almost fading.

"When I arrived, he was already dead," Claire recounted everything in detail, for the first time, contrary to the laconic version she had given to the police.

"He tried to abuse my sister. She resisted, pushed him... and he fell. His head hit the corner of the table."

Her fingers clenched the sheets as she remembered:

"My sister called me, desperate. I went there and... took care of everything. I sent her home and created false evidence. I altered the scene."

Bell felt the bitter taste of irony: the one everyone called a monster was actually a sister who had sacrificed herself.

"I did everything I could to make the police believe it was me."

Claire explained, her voice firmer now:

"The multiple stabbings, the theft of the computer... it was all staged. I could not let her lose her future — there was only one year left until...."

Bell interrupted, eyes wide:

"So the 19 stab wounds that the newspapers reported...?"

"It was six or seven, at most." Claire gave a bitter smile. "The media exaggerated it. But it ended up being useful— no one messes with a 'killer psychopath.'"



She found a silver lining even in the worst-case scenario: after the incident with the 3D gang on the first day, no one dared to disturb her anymore.

But Bell couldn't stop there:

"When you said your sister was harassed... what was it like?"

"Yes. And it wasn't just my sister."

Claire spoke with a calmness that hid old wounds:

"I also studied at this school. I remember a girl from another class disappearing out of nowhere after the sports festival. She dropped out of classes, exams... no one knew why."

She paused, her eyes lost in the past:

"Until they started saying she was pregnant. Even though she had never had a boyfriend. The only man she had contact with was... him."

Bell grimaced in disgust. It was disgusting to imagine: a teacher, an adult who was supposed to protect, using his authority to satisfy sick desires. And worse, ruining a life that had barely begun.

"That teacher never had any remorse. At first, I thought he was trash, but he managed to be even worse."

Claire spat the words with pure hatred, with no room for forgiveness or redemption.



"A few days ago, the police showed me a video... he secretly filmed a student during... during the act. The owner of the camera was that piece of shit."

She took a deep breath, her fists clenched so tightly that her nails dug into her palms.

"My sister was just a kid. Smarter than me. I wasn't going to let a piece of trash like him ruin her future."

Her voice cracked, a rare display of vulnerability.

Bell instinctively reached out to caress her face, offering her a safe haven.

It was the first time that Claire, who had always protected everyone, allowed herself to be comforted.

In the darkness of the cell, Bell fixed her eyes on Claire's lips—full and marked by a subtle scar that had always fascinated her.

Her thumb slid unconsciously along the contour of that mouth, as if the painful story she had just heard was a reminder:

They no longer had to carry their secrets alone.

Bell leaned forward, replacing her finger with her own lips in a kiss that was born of pure adoration. Claire, of course, couldn't resist; she let herself sink into that touch, surrendering herself for the first time, not as a protector, but as an equal.

Claire responded to the kiss with an intensity that surprised even Bell, as if she had been stifling this desire for too long. Her lips moved with restrained hunger, seeking more, always more.



Claire's calloused hands slid beneath Bell's uniform, her rough fingers contrasting with the soft skin they encountered. When her hand moved up toward Bell's chest, Claire hesitated for a second—asking for permission without words.

Bell pulled away just enough to catch her gaze in the dark, her arms wrapping around Claire's neck before whispering,

"You can... you can today."

As soon as she finished her sentence, Claire's fingers were already enveloping her, exploring, gently squeezing her breasts until a sweet moan was elicited from her throat.

Claire leaned down, leaving a trail of kisses down Bell's arched neck, marking the pale skin with red marks that would soon fade.

At some point, the prison jacket had been pushed up, exposing Bell's shivering body to the cold air of the cell—and to the hot breath from Claire's warm embrace, now kissing her neckline with almost reverent devotion.

The noisy fan could no longer cope with the heat, and now, with their bodies intertwined, the air seemed to have turned to fire.

Bell bit her own fist to stifle her moans, her eyes wide with pleasure and panic (what if someone heard?). Fortunately, the hums of the old fans in the hallways muffled any suspicious sounds.

But Claire had no mercy.

Her tongue circled Bell's hardened nipple before sucking hard, eliciting a muffled "Ahnn...!" Bell's hands gripped the sheets as Claire switched to the other breast, repeating the delicious torture.



And just when Bell thought it couldn't get any worse, Claire slid her hand down, her fingers finding the wet heat between her legs.

Claire alternated between Bell's breasts with equal devotion as her hand slid lower, exploring the warm curve between her thighs.

Bell arched as Claire's fingers found her wet center, a muffled moan escaping her lips:

"CI-Claire... Ahhn...!"

Her hands gripped Claire's neck, pulling her into a deep kiss in a desperate attempt to channel the wave of pleasure that threatened to consume her.

Claire didn't give in. Her fingers continued their meticulous work, circling, pressing, each movement synchronized with the tongue that invaded Bell's mouth.

The sound of wet skin and heavy breathing filled the air, mixing with the moans that Bell tried to swallow against Claire's lips.

When they finally broke apart for air, Claire saw:

Bell's face was aflame, her natural pomegranate red lips (even without lipstick) now trembling under the effect of her hands.

She didn't resist.



She moved in for another, more voracious kiss, while her fingers quickened their pace, determined to push Bell over the edge.

Bell's narrow hips moved in sync with Claire's fingers, following an ancient rhythm that would bring her to ecstasy.

The warm liquid that had run down between her legs now soaked Claire's hand, lubricating each movement to prevent any pain.

A hoarse moan escaped Bell's lips this time, without restraint. She no longer cared if the other inmates or the guards heard.

Her body shook uncontrollably, her thighs pressing against Claire's fingers in spasms. Bell's nails dug into her lover's broad shoulders, marking them with red scratches that screamed her pleasure.

When Claire kissed her sweaty forehead, Bell gasped, a sound somewhere between relief and despair. Her hips sank into the mattress, still pulsing with the afterglow of her orgasm.

Bell's parted lips sucked in air, trying to calm her racing heart. Her chest rose and fell in waves of hoarse breath, until finally she whispered:

"Can you... clean it for me?"

Claire didn't hesitate. She stood up, grabbed several tissues from the table, and returned to the bed. With careful hands,



she parted Bell's thin thighs and wiped away the warm liquid that still glistened between them.

Bell watched, eyes heavy with fatigue, as Claire straightened her clothes—the prison uniform now disheveled by passion.

When everything was in order, Claire lay down beside her, pulling Bell's limp, contented body into a hug from behind.

Exhaustion quickly overcame Bell. Her eyes closed, and the last thing she felt was a light kiss on her shoulder, through the fabric of Claire's uniform—the nightly ritual.

Female Chief Inspector Krod returned to the prison with a sterner expression than usual. Her face was set in lines of worry and determination—a stark contrast to the defiant, disdainful look Claire was giving her.

It was always like this: every visit from the police officer was met with hostility by Claire, who clearly considered these meetings an unnecessary torture. But for an investigator like Krod, pursuing the truth was not a choice, but a duty.

“What brings you here this time?” Claire spat the words, her contempt clear before she even threw herself heavily into a chair.



The scene was almost comical in its repetition:

Claire, her shoulders tense and chin held high, defying Krod's authority, unfazed, organizing her documents with military precision.

But something was different today. When the inspector finally spoke, her voice carried a new weight: "We found the video."

"You should know what's going on."

Inspector Krod's voice sounded different this time, serious, lacking the routine tone Claire was used to hearing. This made Claire raise her eyebrows, suspecting that something important was about to be revealed.

Krod placed an old cell phone on the table. The screen was cracked, and it was stored inside a plastic evidence bag.

"This is a second cell phone of Methasit."

Claire shivered slightly. Her mind raced back to a year ago, turning over every detail:

"What do you mean? The police had already confiscated all his belongings... How did this one only appear now?"

She tried to stay calm, but her heart was beating faster. If there was a second cell phone...

What else could it contain?

"Despite the broken screen, we recovered the files."

Inspector Krod spoke with calculating coldness, observing Claire's every reaction.



"There are several videos of harassment of female students, including one with your sister... and the fatal incident."

Claire swallowed. Her mouth opened slightly, but no words came out—only a stunned silence. Her hands, once steady, now trembled on the table.

Krod leaned forward, her voice lower, almost conspiratorial.

"Do you know how we found this cell phone?"

It was a psychological game she had mastered: press, observe, and extract the truth. But this time, the rules were different.

Because Claire wasn't the killer. The real killer was...

"It was your sister who brought it and confessed on her own that she was the one who did it."



Chapter 8

The Choice

"Cl-Claire... Claire... help me, please...!"

Her broken voice barely allowed her to be understood as she struggled to contain her sobs. She didn't even dare look at the man's body that lay motionless on the floor.

Around his head, dark liquid was spreading, contrasting with the cream-colored tile floor. The smell was strong, metallic, like rotting rust. His dark eyes had rolled back, leaving only the cloudy whites. His nose, with no sign of breathing, confirmed what was already obvious: he was dead.

"There's a dead person... Claire, I- I killed someone..."

The young woman, wearing a school uniform, tried to control her voice as she recounted the situation she found herself in. Her body was shaking uncontrollably, and sobs threatened to burst out at any moment.

She could barely breathe when her older sister said she would come right away. The cell phone slipped from her hands and fell to the floor. Her mind repeated in denial, over and over, that this couldn't be real. She silently begged for the limbs of that motionless body to move, for him to get up as if nothing had happened.

But the dead do not come back to life.



Professor Methasit was dead. The back of his head had hit the corner of the table hard when she had pushed him, sending him falling backward. At the time, she had never imagined that it would be fatal. It was only when the dark red blood began to spread in a pool around his head that everything became clear.

Two buttons on his school uniform had been ripped off, the stitching almost completely torn—evidence of what had happened minutes before. It was glaring evidence of what the teacher, a forty-year-old man who still looked young, had been to many female students... and even to some boys who, deep down (or openly), wished they were women. She herself had been one of them.

If she could go back in time, Natty would stay as far away from him as possible. Maybe then the ending would have been different.

Professor Methasit had treated her as his favorite student, but at the same time, they maintained a secret and forbidden relationship. The glances exchanged during physics classes, the messages on the cell phone with words that crossed the limits between teacher and student. Natty admitted that she had been enchanted by his appearance, his gentlemanly air, and the seductive words he whispered to her.

Everything started to get out of control when he scheduled a "special class" just for her...

Several times, she allowed herself to be alone with a man almost twenty years older. He, increasingly bold, almost managed to take her to the point of no return if she hadn't backed down at the last moment.

But things didn't stop there.



The teacher, who had previously been kind to everyone, began to act strangely when he realized that Natty would not give in to his advances as she had before. He became cold and hostile toward her during class, leaving his classmates confused: what was happening to the best student in the class?

Until one day, he purposely "misread" a test and called her to "review the grade" in his office after class.

It was there that Natty was almost raped at the hands of the man she had once admired so much.

She screamed and managed to escape, but her body was shaking uncontrollably. Even so, she did not have the courage to tell anyone—not her friends, not her other teachers, much less her sister or her mother. That night, she returned home in silence and locked herself in her room, alone.

From that day on, Natty started to miss physics classes, even though the subject had a huge impact on her grade and there were important assessments. Professor Methasit even sent colleagues to warn her that if she missed one more time, she could fail the class.

But for her, an "R" on her report card was better than having to face him again.

Just when she almost crossed paths with him in the school hallways, she swerved out of the way, desperate to avoid him. But how do you get away from someone who worked in the same place?

And, as if that weren't enough, that disgusting man, disguised as an exemplary teacher, began to interrogate other students about her...



In a classroom, Natty was using a school computer to finish her independent research paper after her last class. Then, a tall figure silently appeared behind her. Before she could react, strong arms wrapped around her, squeezing her tightly. She tried to struggle, but there was no way to fight against the brute strength of that man's figure. Disgust and repulsion invaded her body, and she almost vomited when she felt his disgusting touch. In the desperate struggle, Natty managed, with one last push, to shove him away.

He fell.

The back of his head hit the corner of the table with a dull thud.

And then... silence.

His body lay still. Dark blood spread across the floor. He was dead.

In panic, shaking uncontrollably, Natty could barely hold the phone as she dialed her sister. Sitting on the floor, hugging her knees, she waited alone with the dead body of the physics teacher.

It was then that, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something... a glow.

Something reflected light in the corner of the room.

It was a strategically placed cell phone, its screen still recording a video of everything that had just happened. Professor Methasit had planned to film it to blackmail her later, but ironically, he ended up recording his own death.



When Natty looked through the images, she discovered videos of other students, all in intimate situations, forced or manipulated by him. Her hands were shaking so much that the device slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor, cracking the screen.

She hurriedly turned off the recording and hid the cell phone in her backpack.

No one could see this. Not even Claire.

After a young student's confession, the truth came to light: the real killer of the physics teacher was not "Claire 19 stabs," who had been sentenced to thirteen years in prison the previous year, but rather Claire's own younger sister, who presented the victim's cell phone as evidence.

The device contained crucial videos, including the moment the teacher attempted to abuse a student, the struggle that followed, and, finally, the push that caused him to fall, hitting the back of his head on the edge of the table. The impact was fatal: forensic examinations confirmed a fractured skull, brain damage, and spinal cord injury, causing respiratory arrest and instant death.

When Claire confessed to being solely responsible for the crime, the police found several inconsistencies in her testimony. It didn't make sense for her to have stolen a computer from the school, a busy place that was difficult to steal from, and to have acted alone, since her younger sister, who was still studying there, could have helped her.



But Claire stuck to her story, insisting she acted alone. When asked about her sister, she simply replied:

"It was me. She was already gone."

It was only later that the police discovered the truth: Professor Methasit had a history of harassment and abusive relationships with female students, including Claire herself when she was still a student. He manipulated them, demanding their silence in exchange for "protection."

In fact, it wasn't Claire who had a secret relationship with the teacher. It was another student, in the same class, who maintained an especially close connection with him.

Until one day, that girl disappeared from school.

Rumors among colleagues said that she was pregnant, and the institution forced her to leave as soon as the news came to light.

With all the evidence gathered, last year, even without a confession,

The police suspected that Claire was already aware of the teacher's evil nature. Perhaps she even knew that he was harassing her younger sister. And, unable to bear so much anger and pain any longer, she decided to act.

But now, the truth has finally come to light:

It was Claire's younger sister who, in defending herself, unintentionally caused his death. And Claire, to protect her, took the blame for a crime she did not commit.

"Can you tell me what happened when your sister arrived?"



The police officer in charge of reopening last year's murder case stared at Kranit, the 17-year-old who, this time, seemed much calmer than in her previous interrogations.

There were no boyfriends around, and she was not allowed into the interrogation room. Only the teenager and Deputy Krod were present.

"Claire told me to go home," Kranit replied, her voice firm.

"Didn't she say what she would do?"

"She just told me not to say anything. That if the police asked, I should say I didn't know anything. That she..."

She hesitated.

"...would take the blame for me."

Her voice cracked at the end of her sentence. Tears welled up as she was forced to relive the worst day of her life.

Deputy Krod received a discreet signal from the social worker present at the interrogation, a protocol to protect the psychology of minors.

It was time to be cautious.

"So, the injuries on the victim's body... your sister inflicted them after death, to cover up the crime?"

"I think so."

The policewoman sighed. No one deserves to be murdered, no matter how disgusting the person was. But Methasit had abused his authority as a teacher, manipulating students with promises and intimidation. It had escalated until one girl became the culprit in society's eyes, and an innocent sister had done everything she could to save the younger one's future.



"In fact, what you did was without the intention to kill. The court may consider it self-defense. But I understand that your sister didn't want you to have your reputation tarnished, to lose your studies, your future..."

"I know..." Natty replied in a barely audible voice, looking down at her hands in her lap, her eyes visibly trembling.

"So why did you decide to confess to the police now?" The deputy chose her words carefully, trying to spare the young woman. For a whole year, the case had been closed once the original accused had been sent to prison...

"Once the accused was sent to serve her sentence, the police had no reason to reopen the case... unless new evidence came to light to turn the situation upside down. As is happening now."

The interrogation was silent for a moment. The police officer tried to predict what the young woman's answer would be. After a few seconds, Natty finally spoke:

"I kept this secret for a year... until I couldn't take it anymore." Her lips pressed together as she struggled to control her voice.

"At first, I saw those scenes every night... when he tried to harass me... when he was dead in a pool of blood. Claire made me promise not to tell anyone, but I can't carry this alone anymore. My mother still thinks it was Claire... she never mentioned it, never visited her in prison. All this hate should be directed at me, not her. Claire should be out there living her life... not me..."



"Claire wouldn't want to hear that," the policewoman thought, remembering the expression on the face of the prisoner she used to visit. Every time they tried to talk, Claire would refuse with a cold, "I don't want to waste your time."

What would Claire do if she knew that the sister she had sacrificed her future for... could no longer bear the weight of that "protection"?

Natty shook her head, swallowing back tears. It didn't matter what the outcome was—she knew that making the decision to speak out was the right thing to do.

"I couldn't bear to live with this nightmare anymore either."

The door to the interrogation room swung open. The young student followed behind the police officer in charge of the case, unable to even lift her eyes from the floor. In that difficult moment, she wondered: who would be by her side now?

There was Joe, her boyfriend, who had been with her from the moment she decided to confess to the police. He hadn't moved a step away—whether as a boyfriend or as that classmate who had become so important, his support remained unwavering.

But it wasn't just Joe who was there.

Her mother, tears streaming silently, pressed her lips together as she watched her youngest daughter being led away by the police. She was wearing her uniform as a cleaning supervisor at the shopping mall near her home—she had probably run home from work when she heard the news. Her hands, rough and scarred from the hard work since her husband's death, trembled as she held her daughter's arms with desperate strength.



The old woman burst into convulsive tears, without uttering a single word of reprimand to her daughter. An unbearable weight pressed down on her chest as she fully understood what had happened to her two daughters.

The youngest, reduced to impotence after suffering indescribable violence, had not even dared to confide in her own mother... While the eldest—the one she had despised so much—had shown herself capable of the purest sacrifice, assuming the guilt of others, driven by the conviction that her own future was worth infinitely less than that of her younger sister.

"Forgive me, daughter... Forgive me..." The mother almost collapsed on the floor, if it weren't for the firm embrace of her youngest daughter that supported her. The two broke into convulsive tears, while those present witnessed the moving scene.

"We have some breaking news. I'm sure everyone will be as shocked as we are. If you remember the murder case of the physics teacher at the school last year—where the accused, known as 'Claire of the 19 Stabs,' allegedly stabbed the victim repeatedly—the Wong Thong Lang police station issued a statement this morning. New evidence has come to light, and the real culprit has confessed to the crime."



The announcer continued his story, confirming the veracity of the new information, while images of the victim's face were shown to refresh the audience's memory. Almost everyone remembered it well - after all, it was a case that had shocked the country.

The killer, a woman, had repeatedly stabbed a much larger and stronger man, leaving inexplicable marks of hatred. But the new revelation was so shocking that even the seasoned news presenter struggled to maintain his composure.

"It is with deep sadness that I report the facts recently uncovered by the police. The late Professor Methasit Yuttanawi... sexually abused several female students. According to records, at least ten. And it did not stop there. He secretly filmed the abuse to distribute on illegal platforms and profit from it."

The reporter, a respectable-looking man, shook his head in disbelief. As a journalist, he was supposed to maintain impartiality, but it was difficult to contain his emotion. In a subdued voice, he continued:

"Let's call the real culprit 'Ploy' to protect her identity. Ploy is 17 years old, in high school and is Claire's younger sister. She confessed to the police that on the day of the crime, the teacher tried to rape her, and during the struggle, he fell, hitting his head on the edge of a table. The impact was fatal. After that, as everyone knows, Claire intervened - tampered with the crime scene, created a false narrative and took the blame for the murder."



"An infographic appeared on the TV screen, clearly explaining the relationship between the three people involved. It was tragic: a minor, a victim of sexual abuse by a teacher, had unintentionally become the murderer. The incident left deep scars, destroying her future and her world. To protect her, her face was pixelated, and a fictitious name was used, in accordance with child protection laws."

"You may be surprised to learn that it was Ploy herself who turned herself in to the police, nearly a year after the crime. This led to the reopening of the case and, of course, a review of Claire's conviction. The police have said that although she is cleared of the murder charge, she still faces charges of concealing evidence, obstructing justice, and aiding a criminal..."

Claire didn't wait for the report to finish. She got up from the recreation room, where some inmates were watching the news after lunch, and left, indifferent to the eyes now following her. The truth was out: she wasn't the killer everyone had believed her to be for an entire year.

But at that moment, the woman who had taken the blame to protect her younger sister didn't notice the compassionate looks from the other prisoners. After all, who could condemn her for a "mistake" born out of sisterly love?

"Total bullshit."

"That son of a bitch teacher deserved it. He did this to so many kids..."

"That's right! A piece of trash like that didn't deserve to die quickly. They should've thrown him in the rapists' wing of the prison; the inmates would have taken good care of him!"



"If I were Claire, I would have stabbed her more than twenty times!"

As Bell followed her beloved in silence, she heard the comments of the other inmates. They not only understood Claire's situation, they defended her. Although part of society still criticizes those who protect a criminal, many—perhaps the majority—refused to judge a victim of sexual abuse who fought back. After all, few know how they would act in her place. There was no right choice. Claire did the best she could with the options she had.

Bell followed her to the prison's outdoor garden, near the vegetable beds where the two of them used to tend the rose plants together.

But this time, the tall woman wasn't there to water plants; she just needed a place to calm her thoughts. The secret she had kept so closely was now exposed. Her younger sister had chosen the truth, and everything Claire had built to protect her had crumbled before her eyes.

"Claire..." Bell called softly, probing. She didn't know if Claire wanted company right now, but she needed her to know: "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Before..." Claire's voice trailed off. Her shoulders shook slightly, still facing away as she spoke. "Before, I thought my mother and sister could live normally without me. My mother would have to work harder since I wouldn't be there to help. And my sister... I knew she had left her old school, but she would still be studying for the entrance exam... but now..."

For the second time, the tall woman before Bell succumbed to the emotions that flooded her. Bell stepped forward, wrapped her arms around her trembling figure, and hugged her from behind. She felt Claire's body shudder, tears streaming silently down her face without a single sob.



"Now... I don't know if Natty will be able to handle this alone. It was hard even for me... That's why I didn't want her to go through all this. What about Mom? How will she feel? Before, at least she still had Natty, but..."

Even at the height of her grief, Claire still thought of others before herself. Bell tightened her hold, trying to comfort her the only way she knew how:

"You did the best you could in that situation. Your sister must have thought a lot before confessing too. This is no one's fault... I'm sure Natty doesn't blame you. Please don't blame yourself."

"I always assumed Natty wouldn't be able to get through this. I've been underestimating my sister all along... Did I accidentally push her? I'm..." Claire continued to speak through tears, her heart clenching as if invisible hands were crushing it. Bell's embrace was her only reminder that she wasn't drowning in this pain alone.

"Worrying about your sister and mother is not a bad thing. You did nothing wrong... but right now, we need to respect Natty's decision. Accept what's coming. Believe me, one day you will all get through this—you, your sister, and your mother."

"Dao, are you feeling better? I brought you some soup in a cup and stole some boiled eggs from the cafeteria. Eat something before you take your medicine."



Deuan returned to the room she had shared with Dao for years, ever since she arrived in prison. They knew each other so well that they didn't even need words—even for what was buried in the subconscious, far from other people's ears. Despite the age difference (almost ten years) and completely different stories, they shared their pain as if they were sisters.

For the past few days, Dao had been sleeping, exhausted—no fever, but refusing food to the point that Deuan had to sneak something in every time. When she suggested calling a doctor or going to the hospital, Dao refused: "I don't want to cause trouble." But even to sit up and eat, she barely had the strength.

"Can you do it? Come here." Experience caring for bedridden patients had taught Deuan how to support someone's body safely. Dao had initially refused, not wanting to appear incapable, but feeling her head spin, she grabbed Deuan's arm to sit up.

"While you were in bed, you missed this morning's big news story," Deuan said, trying to distract her while she prepared instant soup with hot water. "Claire's case broke. They found out she took the blame for her sister. That '19 stab wounds' thing? It was all a lie. She just covered up the crime."

"Seriously? So, the sister was the killer?"

"Not really. The teacher was a son of a bitch who messed with kids and even filmed it to humiliate them. Claire's sister was the victim. He died when she tried to resist. Claire didn't want her sister to lose her future, so she took the blame." Deuan recounted all the facts she had heard on the news without omitting a single detail. As much as they hated Claire, the tragic truth caused their sense of compassion to awaken.



"How much she must have loved her sister to do such a thing?"

"Apparently, the family was poor. She didn't finish her studies; she had to start working to help her mother support her sister... Claire was the only hope. I didn't want her to go to jail." Deuan mixed the soup in the cup until it was smooth. She scooped up a spoonful and, out of habit, began to feed the patient, forgetting for a moment that she was not caring for her paralyzed grandmother. Dao did not reject the gesture, leaning forward to eat. But then...

A rancid smell rose to her nostrils, forcing her to step back. The dizziness worsened, bringing with it an overwhelming nausea.

"Did you give me spoiled soup? Did you check the expiration date?"

"Crazy!" Deuan immediately denied it but still turned the package over to confirm. "It's within the deadline; there's still plenty of time!"

However, Dao wasn't faking it. In addition to feeling instantly nauseous when she smelled it, she coughed violently, as if she were going to vomit. Deuan put down the cup of soup and ran to grab an empty plastic bag, hurriedly handing it to the "elder sister" in the cell.

Dao pushed the bag away to expel the contents of her stomach, while Deuan ran her hand over her back, trying to help her vomit faster.

"Let's go to the doctor, Dao. I'll ask for permission."



"No... I don't want to..." As soon as she finished her sentence, vomit erupted violently, almost making her choke. Since she hadn't eaten anything in the past two days, all that came up was gastric juice—acidic and burning, burning her nose and throat agonizingly. Deuan took out a bottle of aromatic oil and waved it near Dao's nose, hoping to ease her nausea.

"Ugh, who's throwing up? Are you pregnant or what?"

One of the inmates, in another cell, was irritated by the sound of vomiting echoing through the corridors. Not knowing who it was, she shouted shamelessly. Dao, in turn, was too weak to react or even respond.

But that comment made Dao and Deuan exchange a meaningful look.

How could Deuan not know? All these years, she had known that her "older sister" was having a secret affair. It was believed that Dao would never get pregnant—not only because she was over forty years old, but also because of the abortion she had with her ex-husband. Doctors had warned that this would make it difficult to get pregnant again.

"You haven't had your period for months..."

Dao turned pale. Lately, she hadn't even paid attention to whether she had her period or not, assuming that she was entering menopause. Furthermore, for the past few years, she had been taking birth control pills religiously, especially after having sex with Vichai, her lover and business partner in illegal business. All this made Dao believe that an accident would be impossible.

"Two months... if I'm not mistaken." She swallowed hard, the nausea and dizziness now mixed with a chill down her spine. Before they could discuss further, Didi appeared in the cell doorway, her eyes wide as she had overheard fragments of their conversation.



"Dao... are you pregnant?"

In her hands, Didi held two bottles of water that the group's "vice-leader" had asked her to fetch. That's why she arrived late, unaware of the situation. But by connecting the dots—Dao's inexplicable fatigue over the past few days, the fever that wouldn't go away, the vomiting heard throughout the hallway—she could only come to one conclusion.

"We don't know if it's true yet, so don't spread it!" Deuan warned in a low voice, looking over Didi's shoulder to see if anyone else was listening.

"It was with Vichai, right? You always stay with him. On top of using you to take care of his business, now that son of a bitch has even gotten you pregnant? His son is already an adult; he should know better!" Didi left the water bottles on the table and knelt beside the bed, demanding to know who would take responsibility for Dao's pregnancy.

It was obvious that one of the few men there could only be the prison director or his son, who had recently started working there. Furthermore, Dao had never gotten involved with anyone else...

"Uncle Sing is already dead... so only Vichai is left."

"I said I'm still not sure if I'm pregnant! Why are you pushing so hard?" The voice of the younger stepsister, in her early twenties, dropped clearly.

Didi felt a pang in her heart. Whenever she tried to speak or give advice to her two older colleagues, they would simply ignore her or scold her, as if they disagreed with everything she said. Was it because she was still too young for her words to carry any weight? Or could it be that deep down no one really cared about her from the beginning?



"Let me first confirm if it's true. Then we'll think about what to do."

"If it really is, you should tell that Vichai. At the very least, it's his child... he has to take responsibility."

Dao didn't know what to do. At first, her relationship with the prison warden was purely a matter of business interests. But over time, as the man and woman became closer, certain things began to emerge between them. They started an affair in secret, even though they knew that Vichai already had a family—a wife and a child. Even so, she agreed to be his "second wife," allowing him to visit her from time to time, in between his duties at the prison.

Of course, if her pregnancy were discovered—and sooner or later her belly would grow until it was obvious to everyone—the illegal business they were running would not remain a secret for long. For an inmate like her, the consequences could be brutal.

As a high-ranking public official, Vichai would likely just be transferred to another unit, but she would have much more to lose. Not to mention the other life that, if it came into the world, would be destined to grow up in an oppressive prison environment, with a mother who is a "marked prisoner" and a father who, most likely, would not take responsibility or support her in the future.

If the child were born in such precarious conditions—without health, without resources, without a decent home—Dao had already decided that it was better to prevent it from coming into the world.



"If I'm really pregnant, I'll have the baby removed."

"You can't, Dao! An abortion is dangerous... Let me talk to Vichai, at least..."

"If it's done soon, the child isn't even a fully formed being yet. It's not dangerous. Either way, I'll take it out." Dao stuck to her decision, not expecting help from anyone, especially not from Vichai, who wasn't even worth arguing with. Even to control his own son—who was always meddling where he shouldn't, inspecting illegal goods almost daily, and managing even the smallest details of the products brought for sale—Vichai never took action. He let his son do whatever he wanted, forcing Dao to hide so as not to be discovered.

"We can raise the child together, Dao. It's just a child..."

"It's not 'just a child'! It's a life, Didi! Raising a child is not like playing with dolls, picking them up and putting them on your lap whenever you feel like it. What about milk? Diapers? What about when they get sick? How are we going to pay for their studies when they grow up? Do you think it's fair to let them grow up..."

"In a prison like this, what future would they have? Have you stopped to think? It's easy to say when it's not your child!" Dao shouted, not caring if anyone could hear. She could no longer stand Didi's stubbornness, who insisted on thinking she was doing the right thing, but without considering the consequences.

Didi looked as if she had been hit in the face with a stick. It was the first time one of her older sisters had yelled at her. Before, they had only teamed up to attack others, taking out their hate on people who didn't deserve it.

Deuan, who had been silent until then, raised her hand and stroked Dao's arm, trying to calm her down... No one defended Didi.



The youngest of the group suddenly stood up, turned her back, and left the room without even looking back. All this time, she had been trying hard to get closer to her older sisters, helping them in situations that went far beyond the ordinary. But in their eyes, she was like the villain in a soap opera that Dao always criticized—always provoking, attacking others, even resorting to violence. Didi always started fights just because she wanted to feel included, expecting her sisters to protect her stubborn head.

Even though she knew deep down that she was just an intruder, decades younger than her older sisters, whenever they had something to discuss, they did it just between the two of them, never including her...

The sound of footsteps approaching the cell made Didi's heart beat faster for a moment. She thought Deuan had come after her to reconcile. But no... It was Kaew, the new cellmate, who had moved there after escaping from another group. Didi turned her face away, not wanting to talk to that poisonous snake who had betrayed her own friends. Any day now, she might sink her venomous teeth into her.

"Lately, I've noticed that Dao and Deuan don't tell you anything. It's just like when Bell hid things from me... What's more, they do everything behind your back. Even your good feelings, they throw away..." Kaew said these words in a soft tone, feigning deep understanding. She sat down on the empty space of the mattress and continued:

"We're both the same, you know? I know you hate being left out... Me too."



During this visit to the women's prison, Lieutenant Krod noticed that the atmosphere between her and the long-term inmate, Claire, had improved significantly. Claire no longer displayed the hostile attitude she used to—there were no insults, provocations, or attempts to avoid her. Maybe it was because her case had been reopened, with new evidence and the confession of the true culprit. Now, she had no more reason to keep denying everything.

"How are you?"

"Same thing," Claire replied in a monotone voice, showing no emotion.

If she was honest, if it weren't for Bell—who now shared with her the burden she had previously carried alone—Claire would probably be much worse off.

"You don't need to worry about your little sister. But telling you not to worry is useless... you'll worry anyway."

A small corner of her mind insisted on stirring up painful memories, asking, *"If my sister had met decent people from the beginning, would our lives have ended like this?"* As positive as the lieutenant tried to be, the horrible experiences Natty went through sent a chill down Claire's spine.

But deep down, she knew: if her sister could open her heart to someone so soon after suffering so much, it was because she herself had chosen to do so. Claire mentally repeated what Bell always said: *"Let her learn, whether from good things or bad."*

"Oh, and... someone sent this to you. They didn't have the courage to deliver it in person."

The lieutenant took three compact lunch boxes out of a cloth bag, leaving Claire confused.



When the lieutenant placed the lunch boxes in a row on the table, Claire frowned slightly, puzzled. She reached out to pull them closer and, with her fingertips, lifted the lids to see the contents.

The first box contained garlic-fried pork—a dish that could last for weeks. The second box held three generous pieces of crispy salted fish. And the last box contained her favorite dish: fried chicken wings with fish sauce. The familiar aroma made Claire feel tears burning her eyes without warning. She remembered the sound of the oil bubbling as the marinated wings were dipped into the pan. How long had it been since she'd come home and asked her mother, *"What's for dinner tonight?"*

"You can keep it for yourself or share it with your friends. I'll bring it more often," said the lieutenant.

"You don't have to..." Claire pressed her lips together, taking a deep breath to hold back the tears. She wanted to rub her eyes with her sleeves but resisted, not wanting to appear vulnerable in front of the police officer. "I mean... don't take this from her. Tell my mother to come herself."

"I'll talk to your mother then."

It was a positive sign for the family. An outsider like Lieutenant Krod, acting as a go-between, might not fully understand what had happened between mother and daughter in the past. It wasn't exactly hatred, but pride had built a wall too high for a direct confrontation. So the mother tried to make up for it with food—like so many others who, deep down, felt guilty, but instead of asking for forgiveness, simply called their children to eat.



"There's one more thing I wanted to ask you. If you don't know, that's okay."

Now that the situation had calmed down and Claire seemed more receptive and less defensive, the lieutenant took the opportunity to ask her question.

She watched closely, assessing whether Claire was willing to talk, before continuing:

"I heard that Bell, your girlfriend... was arrested for drug trafficking, right?"

Claire didn't question how the lieutenant knew who she was involved with. Like last time, news probably spread quickly within the prison, as if someone were always watching. The tall woman simply nodded in confirmation.

"I only recently found out that Bell was one of the people arrested in that police operation at a nightclub almost two months ago. There were only children of politicians, celebrities, rich people there... Did you know her ex-boyfriend is the son of a politician?"

The second question sounded like a test: had Bell told Claire about her ex, who had even sent lawyers to help her with the case—but in the end, she was still convicted, while the ex, the son of a politician, walked away without a single charge?

"Now, I have evidence that he may be involved in drug trafficking with his friends... but I haven't been able to make much progress in the investigation yet."

The lieutenant looked frustrated, as if venting about the difficulties of her job.



"That night, the operation at the club was meant to catch him red-handed, but he escaped. Others ended up being arrested... but that's how it goes. People like him have a thousand ways to slip through the cracks. If they don't shift the blame onto others, they use money to buy the silence of the officers."

She was clearly venting her frustration with a system where, at every turn, she faced obstacles—whether it was sabotage from colleagues or powerful figures blocking her path.

"Typical, right? Jail's only for poor people," Claire finally said, unable to ignore the bitter irony. She thought to herself: *If I had enough money to pay for a good lawyer—one who could turn mistakes into successes, serious crimes into minor offenses—my life would be so easy I wouldn't even have to fear the law.*

"Ask your girlfriend, please. If she knows anything about the politician's son... let me know."

"I'll see if I ask."

"And you're not denying she's your girlfriend, huh? Wow, how cute!"

"What a mess... If the question has nothing to do with the case, I won't answer it."

Despite the response that bordered on a reprimand, the lieutenant let out a satisfied laugh. It was the first time Claire had opened up enough to talk—even just a little. It seemed someone had finally given her a "dose of socialization"—perhaps Bell, who clearly wasn't just anyone, since she had managed to tame Claire so well.



Chapter 9

The Origin of Everything

The coconut fiber broom in the young girl's hand swung gently, sweeping away the dry leaves scattered across the wide courtyard. Bell and about ten other inmates were working together, cleaning according to the daily chore list. Some were busy scrubbing the slime stains from the concrete floors—slick patches that could easily cause someone to slip and fall—while others painted the worn benches, their varnish long deteriorated after years of sun and wind.

Bell didn't notice when someone cut across the yard toward her. She was focused, head down, raking the leaves into a pile. The person, however, seemed to have her as a clear target, as if they had planned the conversation for days. Without hesitation, the voice called out:

"Bell, can I talk to you?"

Bell gave a slight start at the unexpected voice behind her. Fortunately, it was Claire—not one of the enemies who usually gave her trouble. Lately, the feared "3D gang" had been quieter, especially with rumors circulating that Dao, the leader, was sick, had no appetite, and was spending her days in bed. *At least I don't have to face her in the cafeteria*, Bell thought, relieved.

"What's wrong? You seem tense," Bell asked, genuinely concerned.



Even though the incident with Claire's sister had happened only a few days ago, it was impossible for her to have already shed the burden she carried on her shoulders as if it were the weight of the entire world. But at least Claire had stopped blaming herself for everything. Perhaps Lieutenant Krod's recent visit had helped.

But Bell's assumption was completely wrong.

This time, it wasn't something about Claire that had her chasing Bell for nearly half an hour through the prison, until she finally found her sweeping leaves in the courtyard.

"I need to ask you something... It's a message from someone."

"Hm? You can talk." Bell dropped what she was doing. She had already swept up more than half the dry leaves and still had time before the guards came to inspect the work. But she noticed that Claire was visibly tense, struggling to find the right words. Claire's mouth opened several times, but no sound came out, as if she were mentally rehearsing each syllable.

"When I spoke to the police officer, she asked me to ask you if... your ex-boyfriend is involved in drug trafficking. They're looking into it," Claire began to explain, with an urgency that made it seem like if she didn't speak right now, she would explode. "It's the one with the surname Sangkhabut, isn't it?"

"Yes. His father is Wanchaloem Sangkhabut, of the Social Party."

The more Bell confirmed the names, the more agitated Claire became.

Suddenly, she pulled out a dusty notebook. Though she had tried to clean the cover a little, it still looked worn. She flipped it open to the last page. The paper was yellowed and



wrinkled with age, but what caught the eye was a newspaper clipping glued to it, with only one headline visible:

“Former Suan Luang MP involved in drunk driving accident!”

“He denies all accusations, insists he was just a passenger”

The photo in the newspaper showed a car with a dented hood, taken in the middle of the night. Beside it, a man with a familiar face—though younger than he was now—was talking to police officers. To his right, a woman stood silently, almost invisible.

The caption summarized:

“Wanchaloem Sangkhabut (left), former lawmaker for Suan Luang, admits to being drunk but says his secretary, Kannikar Saenchoti (right), was the driver.”

The accident had hit two pedestrians: a mother who died at the scene, and her teenage daughter, seriously injured and rushed to the hospital.

Continued on page 14.

“Remember when I told you about my former cellmate who was convicted of a fatal accident? She actually took the blame for a politician...” Claire pointed to the newspaper clipping taped to the notebook. “That’s the case here. She kept this evidence, perhaps in the hope that it would one day clear her name. My aunt kept this after she... hung herself. She thought maybe she could bring justice for herself, even after she was dead.”

As she explained, Claire watched Bell’s expression closely, trying to discern whether she was connecting the dots. Her eyes fixed on the photo: a bronze car surrounded by festive lights, as if the accident had occurred during a holiday.



"The mother died at the scene... the daughter was seriously injured..."

"Bell... was it this politician here who ran over your mother? If so... he made someone else pay for the crime in his place. This woman..." Claire pointed to the picture of Miss Kannikar, the secretary who was convicted of manslaughter—until the day she decided to "cut her own exit" and leave this world behind without ever seeing justice.

"She had evidence to incriminate him... but she died in prison before she could. So he got away with it, even to this day, always finding scapegoats."

"Like me..." Bell finally broke the silence, as if she were processing each word.

The newspaper clipping, kept for more than ten years, caused Bell to release a bitter laugh, as though she were seeing her own misfortune with cruel clarity:

"So, if it's like you say... if my ex was dealing drugs but I was the one who ended up in jail... if Wanchaloem, his father, ran over my mother and made someone else take the fall..."

It was as absurd as it was tragic. The rich and well-connected lived in peace, no matter how many lives they destroyed. They could hire lawyers, exploit loopholes in the law, and walk free without fear of consequences. The Sangkhabut family—whom Bell had only gotten to know superficially during her courtship—was just that rotten inside.

Bell laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks, but they weren't tears of sadness. It was as if an old knot in her chest had finally come undone, revealing a truth she had always suspected:



"How pathetic I was... It took me a lifetime to realize that this family ruined my future twice."

The moment she stepped into the prison director's office, a cold blast from the air conditioner—on full blast all day—hit her skin. It was a stark contrast to the inmates' cells, where the ultimate "luxury" was a new fan replacing one coated in years of dust.

Dao stood facing the man who held absolute power over the women's prison, already suspecting the reason for the meeting... even though she hadn't wanted things to turn out like this.

She had already lost a baby in the past, after her ex-husband had beaten her bloody. She wasn't prepared to face another loss—but she also wasn't ready for a pregnancy, no matter who it was with. Her age alone posed risks, both for herself and for the child.

All this time, even while maintaining a secret relationship with Vichai, she had been rigorously taking birth control pills. She never imagined they would fail... until she discovered she was almost two months pregnant.

Ten years of a failed marriage had taught her never to submit to a man again. For her, the relationship with the prison warden was a mutually beneficial exchange. If anything went out of control—like this pregnancy—she would be the one to decide what to do.



When Vichai appeared with a tense expression, clearly feeling some sense of responsibility, Dao could already guess who had told him. After all, only a few people knew.

“Was it Didi who told you?”

“It doesn’t matter who told me. Are you pregnant? How far along are you? I thought you were taking birth control properly...”

This was exactly why Dao hadn’t wanted to involve him. She knew his character well—always shifting blame, running from responsibility. How many times had Vichai promised something and never followed through? Even during sex, if he wasn’t wearing a condom, he’d ask her to “just leave it,” and then have the nerve to ask afterward: “Did you take the pill properly?”

“I took it. But no method is 100%. Even high school sex ed teaches that.”

“So what do we do now?”

The irritating question made Dao want to scream. She wanted to turn her back and disappear. “*What do we do? You mean, what do I do?*” she thought, furious. It was always like this—he pushed responsibility onto others, pretending to “help think,” when in reality he couldn’t even think for himself. If this was the kind of man he was, it would’ve been better if he hadn’t shown up at all, pretending to care.

“Don’t worry. I never wanted to keep the child.”

“Are you sure? I think—”



“Spare me the moralizing. If you’re scared of ghosts, the ghost won’t come after the father, will it? Besides, I can handle a bunch of cells that don’t even have a human form. I’ve had abortions before, and no ‘child spirit’ has come to haunt me like in the movies.”

Dao’s voice was sharp like a knife, leaving no room for doubt. Her decision was already made—so much so that she didn’t even consider consulting him first.

“Okay then. If you need help, or if you need me to take you to the hospital, just let me know,” Vichai said, nodding. He sounded relieved, as if a mountain had been lifted off his shoulders. *I can’t believe I’m getting out of this so easily...*

He had only been thinking about how to escape trouble if Dao decided to use the pregnancy to blackmail him. What if the news leaked to his family? How would he explain it to his legitimate wife? And his son, Porsche, who was always hanging around—what if he found out one day?

He never imagined that Dao would shoulder everything alone.

She turned her back and left the director’s office, not waiting for a regret that would never come (at least not from her). As she walked out, the forty-something woman noticed the door was ajar—though she was certain it had been closed when she entered. Strange. But when she saw who had been spying outside, everything made sense.

Still, it wasn’t her problem. She had no obligation to explain to Vichai’s son why his father was cheating on his wife with another woman. Dao simply walked away, leaving Porsche frozen in front of the cabinet door, carrying the weight of truth: the image of the father he had idealized since childhood shattered like glass.



His childhood hero had crumbled.

And what was left?

Just a shameless old man, clinging to dignity like a mask, wearing it for as long as he could.

Lunch that day felt like a re-enactment of Bell's first day in prison: a watery soup made with ground pork, a wilted cabbage leaf, and half a piece of tofu. Claire was lucky enough to have a lunchbox she'd received as a gift from her mother: fried chicken wings with fish sauce—her favorite dish, but one that only tasted right when made by her mother's hands.

"Hey, Claire! Share it!"

"Twenty baht per piece. Pay first."

"What a cheapskate! Only the girlfriend eats for free, huh? The rest of us are commoners?" someone teased as they passed by—half-joking, half-serious. If Claire agreed, it would be their lucky day. But even if she didn't, the provocation was harmless fun. Better that than the tension of silence.

Claire had been more sociable lately. It was strange to see her chatting more, responding to teasing instead of withdrawing like before. Now, wherever Claire went, Bell was never far behind—the two seemed inseparable.



The loud chatter of the cafeteria suddenly quieted—not because of a guard's command, but because of who had just entered, accompanied by a lone friend.

Dao and Deuan were in line as usual. Dao's face, however, looked pale and tired. Rumors swirled: some said she had been sick for days, cursed perhaps by one of the many inmates she had tormented. Others whispered of violent vomiting echoing through the halls. Could something sinister have come out of her? Each prisoner imagined their own horror, guided by superstition.

But what really caused the stir was the absence of Didi.

Some said the other two had expelled her. Others thought it was justified—Didi had always been the most aggressive of the trio, quick to curse or use violence, even more so than Dao and Deuan. Many inmates had avoided her out of fear. Some even wondered aloud if Didi would have survived this long without Dao's protection.

Claire didn't care who came or went, as long as they didn't mess with her. She casually separated the chicken wings with her fork, as always placing the best pieces on Bell's plate. But today, her girlfriend seemed distant. Ever since discovering the truth about the accident that killed her mother—and who had actually been behind the wheel—Bell had withdrawn into dark thoughts, leaning on Claire more than ever before.

Claire now looked forward to her next meeting with Lieutenant Krod. Maybe she could help reopen the old case—or uncover something new. Just maybe, they were on the verge of discovering something that could change everything.



But then... while she was still thinking about how to help, Claire felt the weight of Bell's head resting on her shoulder. When they were alone, Bell was always affectionate—hugs, hand-holding, kisses on the cheek. In public, however, she limited herself to just holding Claire's hand, avoiding any intimate contact.

But now, it wasn't just her head on Claire's shoulder... Bell was gripping Claire's shirt tightly, as if she were suffocating. Her panting sounded like someone who had just run for miles.

"Bell... Bell, what's wrong?"

Claire, realizing something was very wrong, dropped her cutlery and turned to hold her, wrapping her arms around Bell's trembling shoulders.

At that moment, Claire knew something was seriously wrong.

Bell began coughing violently, her body shaking, her breathing quickening as if the air around her had been sucked away. The blood vessels in her eyes burst, turning the whites blood-red. She collapsed—but Claire caught her before she hit the ground.

Inmates at nearby tables noticed the alarming scene. Some pushed their plates away, suspecting poisoning.

"Call a guard! Someone, call an ambulance!"

The more lucid inmates sprang into action at Claire's frantic cry. Despite the panic surging through her, she tried to stay calm. *Poisoning? Allergy?* But poisoning seemed unlikely—the food was from the cafeteria, served to hundreds of inmates. The fried chicken came from her mother, and both she and Bell had eaten it.

What if it's an allergy? But Bell isn't allergic to anything...



“Antihistamine! Does anyone have an antihistamine? Bell’s having an allergic reaction!”

Claire screamed again for help as the inmates formed a tight circle around them. Someone volunteered to run to the barracks for medicine. Meanwhile, without knowing the cause, Claire held Bell’s face in her hands, calling her name to keep her awake.

Soon, the prison guards arrived, announcing that the ambulance was on its way. Bell swallowed the pills they gave her, but she didn’t get better. Instead, she arched her back and vomited everything she had eaten. Her lips were swelling rapidly, and red, hive-like rashes were spreading across her face and torso. It was clearly a severe allergic reaction.

Claire refused to leave her side, even when the guards ordered her to. She kept calling Bell’s name, trying to keep her conscious, ignoring the vomit soaking her clothes. When the ambulance finally arrived in front of the cafeteria, paramedics rushed in with a stretcher and emergency equipment. Only then did Claire back off, letting them take Bell away—but of course, she couldn’t follow. Only the guards were allowed to accompany them.

Claire stood frozen, watching the ambulance disappear around the corner of the building, sirens still wailing. It was only then that her strength gave out. All the self-control she had held onto during the crisis crumbled.

How long will it take to forget the image of Bell fighting for every breath, her lungs wheezing like they were closing up? she thought. *Bell is with the doctors now. She’s going to be fine...*

“The symptoms look like a shrimp allergy...”



"But they never serve shrimp here!" The inmates who were still in the cafeteria were speaking loudly. And they were right—not even cheap chicken or pork was served often, let alone seafood or beef, which were considered luxury items in prison.

"Does anyone here have allergies?"

"What she ate was just simple soup. They've eaten this a thousand times before without any problems!"

"Confess already! You did this, didn't you? Or do you want us to expose you first?"

One voice rose above the noise, cutting through the chatter like a knife. It was Mangpor—the short-haired, tough-looking young woman who worked behind the counter in the prison cafeteria. Her sharp eyes swept over the remaining inmates. Few knew it, but Mangpor was close to Bell, who often stopped to chat with her while buying supplies. It was no surprise she was demanding justice for her friend.

"Speak up, Mangpor! Stop being mysterious!" someone shouted.

"Yesterday, someone came to buy shrimp powder. I didn't suspect anything—I thought it was for cooking. But now it's clear they used it to poison someone with an allergy! I bet they snuck into the kitchen..." She spoke without looking at anyone directly, but the accusation hung in the air like a threat.

Mangpor hadn't even planned to eat lunch—she was tired of the terrible cafeteria food. But when she heard someone scream, "Bell's been poisoned!" she ran straight there. Now, piece by piece, the puzzle was coming together.

"Who would do that? Bell could've died from that allergy!"



“This was attempted murder!” several inmates muttered, outraged. The incident never should have happened. If it wasn’t just Bell with a severe shrimp allergy—but dozens of inmates—it would’ve been a catastrophe. The prison administration would never have been able to control the fallout.

For the first time, Mangpor felt brave enough to point a finger, no matter how powerful the accused was. Maybe it was because she finally had the crowd behind her, instead of facing it all alone. But deep down, she wanted one thing more than anything—justice for Bell.

“So, this time you wanted to kill Bell, huh? Dao, what did she ever do to make you hate her that much?”

The accused stood frozen under the weight of everyone’s gaze. Before Dao could say a word in her defense, Claire was already charging toward the table where she sat—only to be shoved back by Deuan, the heavyset woman who acted as Dao’s bodyguard.

“You’re lying, you bitch! We never bought shrimp powder from you!” Deuan yelled, using her broad body as a human shield.

“Stop making things up! Why the hell would we mess with your wife? We got over that a long time ago!”

“And weren’t you the ones chasing Bell all the time? If anything happens to her, I swear I won’t let it go unpunished!” Claire screamed, her voice shrill, echoing across the cafeteria.

Not a single soul dared step between the two sides of the conflict. The guards had already left after putting Bell in the ambulance, leaving only inmates—wide-eyed and silent—watching the confrontation unfold.



"Are you blind? My sister is sick! When would she have had time to mess with your girlfriend? Stop this madness! Mangpor is lying!"

"I'm not lying! I record every order and the names of whoever makes them. If it wasn't you guys, then who the hell sent Didi to buy the shrimp powder?"

It was hard to describe how Dao's expression changed in that instant.

In mere seconds, Dao's initial shock at being accused turned to fury when she heard her younger sister's name come out of Mangpor's mouth. The pent-up anger surged back to the surface, blending with the unresolved tension that had been simmering beneath the surface.

And while all eyes in the cafeteria had once been on Dao, now dozens of pairs of eyes turned toward Didi, who was no longer beside the sisters. She had taken a step back, but it was too late to escape. Her older sister, whom she admired so much, stood up from the bench, looking at her with eyes full of distrust and betrayal.

Didi longed to be recognized, to be praised as part of the most influential group in the prison. But sometimes, she overstepped the line. It wasn't that Dao had never warned her to curb her arrogance, but Didi had never listened.

"I haven't told anyone your secrets! In all these years, have I ever betrayed you? Trust me! I bought the shrimp powder from Mangpor, but the one who told me to do it was... Kaew!"

New murmurs spread throughout the room at the mention of another name. But no one believed the accusations of the "3D" (Dao, Deuan, Didi), who always seemed to blame each other. It was unimaginable that Kaew—so kind, so harmless, always friendly to everyone—could be the culprit. She was the opposite of those who hurt others without remorse.



"What lie is this now?"

"I'm telling the truth! How would I know Bell was allergic to shrimp? We never exchanged a word! But Kaew knew! I had no idea her allergy would be so severe!" Didi struggled to control her trembling voice as she explained. The claim made some reconsider—maybe she wasn't lying after all.

"And why would Kaew do that?"

"She hates Bell! Because Bell dumped her for Claire. That psychopath is capable of anything, you know that! Otherwise, why would she have hidden methamphetamine in Bell's room? I saw it with my own eyes!" Didi blurted it all out, with nothing left to lose, hoping to regain everyone's trust.

Especially her two older sisters, whose expressions shifted from utter disappointment to thoughtful confusion, mentally processing the words they had just heard.

"At the time, I thought she had just gone back to get her things from her old room. When they found the methamphetamine, I never imagined Kaew would have the courage to do that... I thought it was Bell herself, after all, she's in jail for drug trafficking. But it was Kaew! She knew what Bell had been arrested for. She told me everything. And she knew that repeat offenses would double the sentence..."

Everything Didi said was true—she wasn't lying to save herself. Dao remembered vividly: that day, the youngest of the group had never left her side. Didi had been as clingy as a shadow, constantly telling them about her "feats" (even the exaggerated ones). Though they disagreed on many things, Dao knew Didi better than anyone.



"Remember the day we took Bell's clothes while she was taking a bath? Kaew escaped first, abandoning her friend!" Deuan whispered, just loud enough for Dao to hear.

That day, when they saw Bell, a newbie, heading to the showers at a quiet time, they decided to chase her until they subdued her. But when Kaew came out of the bath and saw the trio waiting, she pretended not to notice Bell, lowering her head and quickly leaving. "As long as I'm safe..." she seemed to think.

A shrill scream tore through the air as Kaew was shoved into the center of the circle of inmates now judging her. She fell like a bird from its nest, desperately scanning the crowd for mercy.

"Confess now! You abandoned Bell with us that time. You said you were her friend, but in the end, you only thought about saving yourself!"

"What did you want me to do? Did I have to be bullied along with you for you to be satisfied?" Kaew screamed, cornered, tears streaming down her face in a pathetic attempt to gain sympathy now that she was alone against dozens of hostile inmates.

"You're a blatant liar! The other day, you said that Bell deserved to suffer. Didn't you keep provoking and making trouble?" Didi spat the words out with pent-up hatred. She should never have let that poisonous snake back into the group after having kicked her out before. She had fallen for Kaew's manipulations, believing her lies that Dao and Deuan wanted to get rid of her—that she had become an "undesirable bitch," just like Kaew herself.

"I just said that Bell was unlucky to be in the wrong place, but that doesn't justify you guys disturbing her! How did this become my fault?" Kaew wiped away fake tears with her sleeve, playing the victim. When Didi grabbed her arm,



demanding the truth instead of theatrics, Kaew howled as though she were being skinned alive.

"Yes, we are evil by nature, but we're still better than you pretending to be friendly, pretending to be kind, while stabbing Bell in the back! Are you going to deny that you planted drugs in her room? Or that you almost killed her with shrimp? Stop lying!" Didi could barely look at that fake pity face; she had seen too many Kaews in her life.

Just like the victim Didi accidentally killed in a fit of rage—the crime that landed her in prison—Kaew was just like that: she gained everyone's trust, only to betray it later, striking like a scorpion. When the time for revenge came, she cried to gain compassion.

Didi's Achilles' heel was her explosive temper. No one defended her, not even Dao or Deuan, who were now accusing her as if everything was her sole fault.

But they were all wrong.

"About the drug powder hidden in the toothpaste tube you planted in Bell's room... I knew from the beginning, I just didn't want to talk about it. It was you, Kaew. You did it all by yourself, and you even tried to drag our younger sister to hell with you!" Dao couldn't stay quiet any longer. Even though Didi was troublesome, she never had any bad intentions. She stepped forward to face Kaew, who was still pretending to sob like a child. It was hard to believe that such a harmless facade hid so much evil.

"So Great Dao admits that she was dealing drugs in prison?" Kaew, refusing to sink alone, stared at the woman in her forties with poisoned eyes. Dao had confessed just to protect her sisters, and Kaew would exploit that.



"Yes, I admit it."

"Dao—!" Didi tried to stop her, but it was too late.

"This means that you and the director have been accomplices for a long time. Smuggling illegal items together... including... your pregnancy with him, right?"

"You talk too much, you damn thing!" It was Deuan who finally exploded, lunging forward to grab Kaew's arm after she had revealed all their secrets in front of dozens of inmates. But Kaew shook her arm hard—the false vulnerability of her tears had disappeared.

At that moment, the three realized: they had created a poisonous snake without knowing it. And now, poison was already running through her veins.

"You were the one who told Vichai everything!"

"Do you think it was Didi? Just now, you humiliated her like she was trash, didn't you?" Kaew's tone remained sharp. She knew that even if she lost, she wouldn't be the only one hurt. The anger and anguish on Dao's face were her greatest victory.

"Do whatever you want with us. We accept it. But what you did to Bell..."

"She deserved it." Kaew replied with an impassive expression, the tears that had previously flooded her face now evaporating as if she could control them on demand.

"I was such a good friend to her... but no, she preferred to get close to others! I was the one who helped her with everything—I was her first friend here, I told her all the secrets, I even shared my food when she had no money. And look how she repaid me!"



"You're crazy, Kaew. You're barely human anymore." The accusation was no exaggeration. As they spoke, Kaew's lips stretched into a grotesque smile, though her eyes remained as empty as glass.

Her eyes did not reflect an ounce of joy like someone with psychological disorders—a needy child who never received love and now desperately demanded attention from others.

"You are no better than me."

"Of course not. What kind of 'good person' ends up in jail? I'm not one either."

A scream of pain echoed through the cafeteria as a stainless steel tray slammed into the side of Kaew's head. Rice, watery soup, and wilted cabbage covered her face, getting into her eyes and ears. She fell to her knees. Claire threw the tray to the floor with a metallic clang, glaring at Kaew as she tried to wipe her face with her sleeves. She had endured the argument until she heard Bell's name being dragged through the mud without remorse.

Still not satisfied, Claire knelt down to be on the same level as the culprit. Her calloused hands grabbed Kaew's face, forcing her to look at her.

The "3D" trio (Dao, Deuan, Didi) might be hesitant to retaliate with so many crimes on their records, but Claire had nothing to lose. She didn't care if she ended up in solitary confinement again.

"This is for what you did to Bell," Claire growled, her voice so full of hatred that it felt as if she could rip hearts out with her bare hands. Her fingers tightened with increasing force, leaving Kaew's cheeks red and any pretense gone. Genuine tears now streamed down her face, untouched.



“Bell couldn’t finish her food because of your shrimp powder. So...” With her other hand, Claire gathered grains of rice from the ground, pieces of wilted cabbage, and crushed tofu. Kaew struggled but couldn’t escape Claire’s grip. “—Swallow it all.”

Without mercy, the disgusting mass was stuffed into Kaew’s mouth, who choked, vomiting with tears and saliva. Claire looked away with disdain, watching her with cruel disgust and satisfaction.

"If something happens to Bell, you can be sure that you will suffer much more."

Prison officers were alerted to a serious disturbance among the inmates. Worse still, an inmate had been hospitalized with an allergic reaction to shrimp, an ingredient that was never on the prison menu. In addition, a widespread fight had occurred, requiring disciplinary punishment, possibly even solitary confinement for those involved.

The warden of the women's prison stood on the stage under the covered pavilion, in front of hundreds of inmates in absolute silence; no one dared to whisper, fearing reprisals. Rumors about Vichai, the warden, spread like wildfire. Now, the looks he received were no longer of respect, but of veiled contempt. How could he punish others when he himself was a criminal?



Vichai, however, seemed unfazed. His command echoed through the loudspeakers with bureaucratic coldness:

"Due to the disturbances that occurred today, and to serve as an example, I will apply the maximum punishment: ten days of solitary confinement for prisoner Krapat Kunthalak. Reason: fighting that disturbs order, assaulting other prisoners, and repeated disciplinary violations without the right to leniency."

Everyone knew: when the warden marked someone, that person's life in prison would become hell. His eyes scanned the crowd until he found Claire, who, to his surprise, stared at him without fear.

As two guards moved forward to stop her, something unexpected happened...

It was like going back in time to the day he had introduced his son to the entire prison. But now, Porsche was leading a group of prison guards unknown to Vichai. The warden froze as his son walked up onto the stage with the men.

"I brought them here to take you in for disciplinary questioning," Porsche said, his voice firm and fearless, but with a gleam of disappointment as he looked at the father he no longer recognized.

"You— What are you doing?" Vichai stammered, his eyes darting between the hostile faces. When had Porsche brought them here? And with what accusation? The answer came straight from his son's mouth:

"You smuggled illegal items into the prison. Here are the records of hidden drugs I found, all documented."

The young man held up a stack of papers densely filled with evidence.



He backed away when his father tried to grab the papers. Vichai glared at his son with eyes flashing with anger and shame.

"How dare you do this to your own father?!" Being exposed like this, in front of the entire prison...

"I should be the one asking how you had the courage. Oh, and what's more: you violated the rules by getting romantically involved with a prisoner, Benyapa. I have security camera footage. Or do you want the prisoner herself to confirm?" Porsche's gaze no longer held an ounce of respect. He waved to the agents he had brought, who immediately restrained Vichai.

No matter how much the director shouted about his position, nothing would save him now.

"Porsche, I'm your father!"

"And when you were doing all this, did you think about your wife?" The young man replied with absolute coldness, watching his father being dragged out under the gaze of hundreds of inmates.

The inmates witnessed the powerful prison warden being taken away like a criminal.

Didi watched Dao, the leader of the group, who showed no signs of distress over Vichai's arrest. Dao had already warned her: she was ready to admit her crimes. She preferred to live within the rules, even in prison, than to continue trafficking drugs or being the lover of a married man.

Meanwhile, her gaze fell on Porsche, the son who had brought down his own father. Her opinion of him had changed completely:



"He actually has value... He doesn't just live off his father's privileges and good looks."

"Lalita is now out of danger. She has been transferred back to our ward."

"I allow you to visit her. And about the solitary confinement my father ordered... Consider it nullified."

Heavy eyelids blinked up at the white ceiling. The changed atmosphere in the prison infirmary confirmed the doctor's words: Bell had been repatriated. The dim light indicated that it must be late afternoon, almost dusk. The side effects of the medication still made her head feel heavy, as if a stone were pressing down on it. But then, a familiar sensation enveloped her hand—Claire was there.

Faithful companion, Claire had fallen asleep beside the bed, a fifteen Baht comic book open on her lap. Bell smiled weakly, even though her body was still weak, and moved her fingers lightly to wake her. Claire woke with a start, squeezing Bell's hand with renewed strength before looking at her beloved, who had finally awakened.

"Bell... how are you feeling?" The comic book was left on the table without a bookmark, without care.

Her fingers ran through Bell's dark brown hair, gently brushing it away from her face.

"Now my face must look horrible..." Bell muttered, her voice still weak.



"When you get better, you'll be as beautiful as ever," Claire murmured, pressing her delicate hand against her own face before gently kissing each of Bell's knuckles. The affection made Bell blush, forcing her to hide it with a playful pinch on her beloved's face.

Claire had a gift for making her feel good, even with her skin still marked by red rashes that would take days—maybe weeks—of ointments to heal.

Bell had had a severe allergy to any kind of shrimp since she was a child. She avoided all seafood, as even mussels and squid had caused her chest tightness and shortness of breath in the past. Naturally, she had told Kaew this when they shared a cell...

She never imagined that the information would be used against her. At least she had survived.

"Are you hungry? Do you want some water?" Claire had never taken care of anyone sick before—when her sister fell ill, her mother had taken the lead, with her simply helping out. But filling a glass of water and holding it for Bell to drink was far from a challenge. With a handkerchief, she wiped the drops from her beloved's swollen lips... but then she leaned in and stole a light kiss, leaving Bell surprised.

"You could wait until I get better..."

"I don't see a problem now," Claire smiled, refreshed to see Bell safe. Their hands remained clasped together, refusing to let go.

Bell admitted: Claire's gestures made her feel a thousand times better. When she woke up and saw her body swollen, covered in hives on her arms, face, and neck—both in exposed areas and under her clothes—she was ashamed to be seen like that.



But Claire looked at her with the same eyes as always, only now with the added touch of "I don't want to let go of you, not even for a second."

"I have one more thing for you," Claire announced, refusing to stop there. Bell raised her eyebrows in curiosity as she watched Claire pick up a felt-tip pen. Her hand was gently placed in Claire's lap, and she began to draw something on her fingers with almost ceremonial concentration, as if she had planned every stroke.

When Claire finally released her left hand, displaying a proud smile, Bell raised her arm to examine the work:

"Blue marker pen ink circling the ring finger of the left hand—it looked exactly like a ring."

"Can we reserve you for now?" Claire was still smiling widely, intertwining her fingers with Bell's left hand, where the engagement ring she had placed herself was already perfectly set. The patient could barely hide her smile, even with her face still covered in red rashes... Even so, Claire insisted that she looked beautiful.

It might not seem like anything special, but that alone made Bell's heart feel warm and fuzzy. And no matter how terrible things got, Claire never left her alone.



Chapter 10

The Rose

Some media outlets reported on the reform of the women's prison administration system, exposing cases of corruption, illegal influence, power peddling, and the restoration of inmates' rights, which had been neglected for years.

Everything came to light after Vichai Phuwet, the prison director, was investigated for disciplinary irregularities. It was discovered that he had misappropriated funds, smuggled illegal products, and facilitated the entry of drugs into the prison, acting as an intermediary for relatives of powerful figures to negotiate shady deals with the inmates.

Additionally, he was charged with breach of ethical conduct for maintaining inappropriate relations with inmates. The former director was not only transferred, as is often the case with public officials in misconduct cases, but was arrested, summarily dismissed, and will face the maximum penalties provided by law.

Few who followed the case believed that the irrefutable evidence—capable of incriminating a high-ranking official like the prison director—came from his own son. It was this blow that finally broke Vichai's already fragile family ties.

If it were just corruption crimes, perhaps he could still turn to his family for help. But on the same day that his son turned him in to the authorities, Benyapa (or "Dao"), the inmate who was an accomplice in the crimes, sent a letter to the prison administration confessing everything: from her involvement with the former warden to the unwanted pregnancy that almost brought a child into the world amid the chaos.



Dao had nothing left to lose. She decided to confess in order to receive medical assistance and terminate the pregnancy legally, under supervision. Now, she awaits a sentence that could increase her prison time—a price she is willing to pay.

The inmates of the women's prison had the opportunity to give interviews to journalists, who acted as intermediaries to reveal the living conditions inside the prison. Many reported the excessive power of some inmates, who use their influence to harass others, from everyday conflicts to violent persecution.

"All it takes is crossing paths with the wrong person in the hallway, without even having done anything, to become a target."

They also denounced the brutality of the guards:

"The agents shout at us all the time; there is no dialogue. If we try to respond, they resort to aggression—sometimes with batons or even military boots. If we complain, we are punished by suspending family visits, without exception."

Others described constant threats and the psychological impact:

"Some of us are threatened so often that it has become routine. We are locked in our cells all day, without seeing sunlight. It destroys our mental health."

"In the name of humanity, does anyone deserve to be treated like this?" asked one of the inmates, her voice breaking.



The reports reveal a broken and cruel system:

"Less than a month ago, an inmate died in prison...but authorities insist that she died in the hospital. The truth? She suffered an overdose due to her advanced dementia. The administration ignored our numerous requests for medical help."

Claire was questioned about the violent incident in the cafeteria days earlier. Contrary to the oppressive system's standard, she spoke the truth fearlessly, supported by multiple witnesses who saw it all.

For the first time, there was no tyrannical warden to order arbitrary punishments such as solitary confinement for personal reasons. Instead, Claire was punished within the law, with a sentence proportionate to what had happened, based on clear rules.

The Department of Corrections has decided that she will serve a two-month sentence cleaning the cafeteria, in addition to having part of her income deducted from her salary and dividends received during her daily vocational training, as compensation for the damages.

On the other hand, Kaew's actions are considered a serious crime, to the point of constituting attempted murder. She adulterated the food with shrimp powder, knowing that Bell had a severe allergy that could lead to her death. In addition, Kaew's abnormal behavior led to an urgent psychiatric evaluation of the inmate.

"Delusional disorder" was the diagnosis given to Kaew by medical specialists. It is a condition characterized by thought disorders, mainly delusions. Patients often present with paranoia (believing they are being persecuted), social isolation, or outbursts of intense anger.



Diagnosed as a potential risk to other inmates, the prison administration decided to impose the maximum penalty:

Transferring her to a special wing intended for inmates with psychiatric disorders, where she will receive strict monitoring.

In a way, Kaew was lucky to be transferred from her original prison. While female inmates do not have a history of brutal beatings, stabbings, or fatal assaults like those in male prisons, that does not mean they would be willing to live with someone who nearly committed murder while in a psychotic state. If she had remained there, Kaew could have suffered violent retaliation from the other inmates — a justice carried out by their own hands.

"I didn't think they'd go this far..." Bell sighed, exhausted, as she rested in the prison infirmary. Her girlfriend came to visit her religiously, only leaving to fulfill her own tasks forced as punishment. Her face was already regaining its normal appearance; the swelling was decreasing, and the red spots on her arms and torso were slowly disappearing. But the seconds on the brink of death still echoed in her mind, a memory that might take a lifetime to erase.

"Nobody expected this from Kaew. She seemed so harmless..."

"She was actually a good friend. It must have been the mental illness that made her dangerous," Bell added, recalling the scenes: she and her first cellmate laughing loudly at each other's jokes, even on days when the arguments began sharply, always ending in silence.

Bell still remembered everything clearly.



"Some people just come into our lives to teach us lessons. Once the lesson is over, we move on," Claire seemed to have overcome the incident better than expected—like someone who has lived long enough to accept even the worst experiences. Almost losing the one she loved was probably a decisive lesson; otherwise, she wouldn't have decided to ask Bell to marry her.

Even now, their hands remained clasped together as Bell slept, affected by the medicine. The spots on her skin that had made the once-frail inmate sick were fading day by day.

Claire's sharp eyes, now more tender than the day they met, watched Bell carefully. *'You just took your medicine...'* she whispered, adjusting the thin blanket to protect her from the cold wind.

Everything indicated that, after the resolution of that incident, things would finally start to improve.

Almost a week later, the atmosphere in the women's prison had changed radically. A new warden had taken over, replacing the former warden, Mr. Vichai, who had recently been fired. Eager to prove his competence and portray himself as a modern administrator, the new warden completely dismantled the old power structures.

The VIP block, which had previously housed privileged inmates, lost its special status. Now, all prisoners were evaluated by a new classification system, based solely on their behavior and individual merits.

Despite the scandal caused by his father, Porsche was not fired. The young man continued his work, presenting proposals to improve the conditions of the inmates, from basic hygiene issues to human rights that had been neglected for years. To the surprise of many, his projects were quickly approved.



Among the changes was the end to the sale of overpriced products to retailers (previously resold by third parties with abusive profits); direct purchases from factories, guaranteeing affordable prices; and book donations, including comics and literary works, for the first time.

Claire almost jumped for joy when she heard the news. Before, she had reread the same old comic book (until she had memorized every page!), but now, the prison library was filled with new stories—even sequels she never dreamed of reading. Bell couldn't help but smile as she saw her with bright eyes, hugging stacks of comics like a kid at Christmas.

Just a change in power was enough to radically transform the situation—from chaotic to hopeful.

Before, Vichai had never cared about the conditions of the inmates. He diverted public funds into his own pockets while the prisoners suffered from a lack of basic necessities. Porsche felt ashamed when he remembered how, for all those years, his father had used dirty money to support the family—including his own luxuries.

But now, with a transparent budget, the women's prison had finally been able to end the exploitative sale of hygiene products (such as sanitary pads, soap, and toothpaste), provide essential items free of charge to all inmates on a monthly basis, and prioritize human dignity over shady profits.

Everything was now provided free of charge. Only extra and superfluous items were still available for exchange for coupons, intended for inmates with better financial conditions.

While inspecting the premises, Porsche spotted a peculiar group: three women of different ages chatting animatedly under the shade of a tree, around a marble table.



With the fall of Vichai, or rather his forced dismissal, the feared "3D trio" had also lost its influence. Now, they were under strict supervision: any new provocation would result in severe punishments, with no chance of appeal.

However, they seemed far from causing trouble. Dao, who had just returned from terminating an unwanted pregnancy (only two months old, fortunately without physical complications), was still too fragile for any conflict. Her weakened state prevented her from even thinking about fighting.

"I can't believe that man's son is asking me how I am..."

The trio's lively conversation was interrupted when Porsche approached. Didi stood out the most among them—visibly happier after reconciling with her "older sisters" and accepting their criticism of her impulsive temperament.

"Are you recovering well? Do you need anything else?" Porsche asked.

Dao could hardly believe what she heard. Vichai's son, the same man she had an affair with, knowing that he was married, now showed genuine concern for her health. Her face burned with shame as she remembered that past, even though she knew the former director was most to blame.

"Every time we met, he would fill me with empty promises..."

Dao could barely look Porsche in the eye. Former Director Vichai had always assured her that he would leave her the day she was released—sweet promises that dissipated like smoke. That sour guilt now made her avoid his son, even though deep down she knew she had been nothing more than a pawn in her father's game.



To Porsche, however, Dao was another victim. He saw her not as an accomplice but as another pawn manipulated by the man who had ruined so many lives.

"Dao won't stop complaining that she's dying to eat som tam with fermented fish!" Didi burst in, as always, with no sense of timing.

"Shut up, girl!" Deuan elbowed her, making the younger sister swallow her next words.

"The doctor has already cleared her to eat normal food, right?"

Porsche asked again, almost ignoring Didi, who pouted when she was overlooked. "She had an abortion, she doesn't have gastritis! She can eat spicy things, yes!" she grumbled, only to receive a verbal earful from Deuan:

"Didi, stop bothering others! Enough!"

This time, however, the guards did not reprimand the usual brawler.

They even seemed surprised when Porsche, calm as a serene river, added:

"She's not complaining. If you want som tam, I can try to arrange it..., but only tomorrow, okay? I'll ask the director for permission to order a special meal for everyone."

"What about nam tok? And sticky rice too? Is that okay, handsome?"

Didi, who had almost fought with the former director's son before, now called him "handsome" with a nerve that left Deuan and Dao between shock and suppressed laughter.

Porsche smiled, but his voice turned as cold as ice (a stark contrast to his earlier calm tone):



"If you behave properly, one day you'll even eat nam tok outside. But for today, that's just the basics."

The two older sisters bit their lips to keep from laughing, while Didi mumbled, dragging out her words:

"Okay, you annoying person..."

Dao then ended the scene with a "Go ahead, handsome, we won't get in your way anymore," waving exaggeratedly. Porsche nodded, but before he *left*, he remembered:

"Don't forget to drink at least two large bottles of water. It helps with recovery."

Dao nodded, her eyes fixed on Porsche's back.

It was ironic: this man, whose father's lover he had no obligation to care for, showed her more compassion than Vichai had ever shown. Tears welled up in her eyes as the weight of guilt washed over her. She, who had once been drunk on the power of their secret affair, now saw clearly what she had sacrificed.

Beside him, Deuan squeezed her hand in silence, while Didi, always one to break up tense moments, muttered:

"What's the saying again? 'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree'? It's more like a jackfruit seed flying into the neighbor's yard! Neither the nose nor the character resemble that old bastard at all!"

Lately, Claire had been acting like a hyperactive Golden Retriever, jumping around—a stark contrast to the reserved woman Bell had met on the first day.



Now, completely recovered from her food allergy (with her skin free of the irritations that had previously plagued her), Bell was back to her radiant self, the one Claire praised daily.

That afternoon, after lunch, Bell noticed Claire's suspicious agitation.

She let herself be led by her taller companion to the prison garden and immediately understood why.

"See? They've sprouted! Look!" Claire lifted a plastic pot with hands trembling from excitement. In the middle of the dark soil, two light green shoots broke the surface.

It was a small miracle: months ago, the two of them had planted four pots of seeds. Bell had bet that none would prevail, fragile and stubborn, defying skepticism.

The joy was evident on the faces of the two young women. Claire, with almost ceremonial care, replaced the vase with gentle hands, as if cradling a newborn baby, before wrapping Bell in a tight hug. The shorter one let out a happy "Meow!" like a euphoric kitten.

"Lalita..."

The name echoed behind them, freezing the moment. They both turned: a guard was approaching, interrupting the intimate scene with footsteps that creaked on the beaten earth.

The guard, surprisingly kind, pretended not to notice the intimate embrace of the couple, even knowing that relationships between inmates violated prison regulations.



Bell stood up, approaching him cautiously, certain there had been some infraction. But the words she heard left her speechless—*therapeutic* instead of prison.

"Tomorrow you will be released. The court commuted your sentence to treatment."

"W... what?" Bell's voice shook, unable to process.

"Your lawyer won on appeal. You don't have to come back here."

Bell knew that very few people in her life would have the influence to bring about an appeal like that. Receiving help from her ex-boyfriend, whom she had never asked for help—having even vehemently refused any assistance to avoid falling into debt—was a painful irony. And yet, the court ruling was clear:

"Bell Lalita, parole granted. She will serve her sentence in a therapeutic treatment regime, no longer in a closed prison."

If she had accepted help from the beginning, she would have avoided jail. But she had been used as a pawn in the political game of Top's father, a man who, she now discovered, was being investigated for involvement in drug trafficking.

If, on that fateful night when the police raided the nightclub, the crystal meth found in her pocket really belonged to Top or some of his friends—planted there to escape the search—how could he still dare to look her in the eyes?

He was no different from his father, who rose through the ranks of politics without a shred of remorse, from a Bangkok councilor to a member of the ruling party's executive committee, while Bell's mother lay dead on the pavement—the victim of an unpunished drunk driver who never faced justice.



"If it were up to me, I would also want you to be able to go out and live outside."

The voice that echoed in the cell wasn't just anyone's; it was Claire's. To Bell's surprise, her partner seemed less shaken than she had expected. Or maybe Claire simply hid her feelings better than Bell realized, keeping an impassive expression, not betraying the pain of knowing that they might not see each other for a long time.

"It's better than staying here. Even taking a shower is a struggle, and the food in the cafeteria is barely inedible..." Claire forced a smile, but Bell could see the artificiality in it. The shorter one approached, buried her face in her companion's broad shoulder, and took a deep breath, absorbing the smell that, from the next day onwards, she might never smell again.

"I'll be out soon too. It won't be long." Claire's rough hands, like fine sandpaper, lightly stroked Bell's light brown hair as she mentioned, "My sentence has been reduced from murder to just obstruction of justice and aiding and abetting. Less than a year left now."

"A year is still a long time..." Bell murmured, her voice muffled against Claire's shoulder.

"In the meantime, you can visit me. And bring me comedy comics."

Claire was still the same Claire as always, worrying about things that others would consider insignificant, but that for her were small joys worth their weight in gold. Bell had learned something important from her: happiness could be found in a blooming rosebud, in a long-awaited comic book... or simply in knowing that the one we love is living well out there, even without us.



"I don't want his help. I don't want to accept something that I know I'll regret later."

Even so, anxiety and distrust bubbled in Bell's mind. Everything was happening so suddenly—how could she deal with it? At first, when she had just arrived at the prison, Bell had been counting the days until she could get out. And of course, she still wanted to leave, but not like this... not accepting Top's help and, worse, leaving Claire behind.

Claire then let go of the hug. She grabbed Bell by the shoulders and guided her to the bed, while she herself knelt on the floor. Carefully, she took her lover's delicate hands and placed them on her lap, lifting her face to look Bell in the eyes, as if she wanted her to memorize every feature of her and every word she was about to say:

"I love you. Maybe we only had a short time together..., but from tomorrow on, on the days that we are apart, I will count every minute until I can leave here and see you again."

Bell's heart trembled at that confession. Her lips pressed together, holding back the tears that blurred her vision, preventing her from seeing Claire clearly. Gently, the taller woman raised her hands and wiped the tears that were streaming down her beloved's pale face, before wrapping her hands around her again. Her thumbs caressed the faint stain of blue ink on Bell's left ring finger, a makeshift symbol of the promise they had made to each other.

"Don't let anyone hurt you when I'm not around. I know you're strong."



Bell nodded, fighting the dizziness she felt at the thought of being separated the next day.

She, so small, got off the bed and threw herself into Claire's arms once more. With a choked voice, she whispered an "I love you too", letting herself sink into her beloved's cozy embrace for a long, long time.

The following afternoon, after her last meal in prison—a moment that many inmates eagerly await—Bell finally found herself free. But for her, the joy was different.

The right to be treated as an equal, without having to beg for dignity. Now, dressed in a simple T-shirt and blue jeans, the attire of an ordinary citizen, Bell was about to cross the prison gates. But inside her, there was a dizzying emptiness, as if part of her soul had been left behind within those walls.

As she left the building after changing her clothes, her eyes met a familiar figure: Claire, standing a few meters away, smiling and waving as if she didn't realize that her goodbye was making Bell's tears return.

Without hesitation, Bell walked towards her without fear of guards, without fear of reprimands, as if the prison rules no longer touched her.

She just needed one last thing:

A hug.

A hug that would last long enough to carry on her skin the memory of Claire's warmth for all the days they would be apart.



"You can go."

The guard gave the two a moment to say goodbye, a rare sight, as most prisoners, upon being released, run straight to their family members who are waiting for them, not back toward those who are behind bars.

As she followed the guard beyond the prison walls, Bell felt something different from the first day she had entered. It was as if the weight of an entire mountain had been lifted from her shoulders. The world outside might not have changed much in those few months, but she had.

She had stumbled, she had fallen, and she had gotten up, sometimes with Claire holding her up, sometimes on her own. But in the end, she had survived.

"You helped heal my wounds... and left a love in my heart that I will never know how to return."

Bell kept looking back, her eyes fixed on Claire's figure until a corner of the building hid her from view.

As soon as she passed through the main gate, she did what almost every ex-prisoner does upon being released:

"Can I borrow a cell phone, please?"

The guard handed her his own phone, warning:

"Just to let your family know. Keep it short."

Bell turned discreetly, revealing a ten-digit phone number written in pen on her palm. Her fingers dialed quickly.

The phone rang only twice before it was answered.



"Hello? Lieutenant Krod, Investigation Department, speaking."

They say it's easy to live in tight spaces, but hard to bear when the heart is suffocated.

Bell sat in the soft leather seat—a luxury unimaginable compared to the hard mattress of the prison. The car engine made barely any noise, a stark contrast to the loud fights that echoed through the prison corridors. The air conditioning, which she hadn't felt in months, blew a cool breeze, so different from the rusty fan she'd used before, which looked more like a metallic cricket about to die.

But for some reason, she felt more uncomfortable now than when she was behind bars.

Bell was sitting in the luxurious leather seat of a European car worth tens of millions of Baht, next to Top, the only heir to an influential politician in the ruling party, whose name was already circulating as a possible candidate to follow in his father's footsteps. With his young and charming appearance, captivating personality, and air of a "prince of politics," he was the sensation of the moment, adored by the masses.

Top drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, visibly pleased. After all, he was the one who had arranged the contacts to speed up Bell's appeal by using her father's influence to pressure the prosecutor's office. It came as no surprise when the court revised the sentence, allowing her to serve her sentence on probation with therapeutic treatment, instead of in prison.

"With that, maybe she could forgive everything he had done in the past." Bell had depended on him for years, rotting in a cell. Without Top, she would still be trapped for years in a cell.



"Are you hungry? Want to eat something? That steak restaurant you love... It's been so long since you've been there." Top extended a caring gesture. He knew that even in a "special" prison, the meals were still poor and insufficient. No wonder Bell was thin and pale, with her sunken cheeks—so fragile that she seemed like she could be knocked over by a breeze.

"I'm not hungry. I already ate."

"Prison food doesn't fill anyone up. Look how skinny you are!"

"I already told you I'm not hungry. I just want to rest!" Bell refused in a firm voice, cutting off any chance of a retort.

The driver, or rather, the stubborn suitor behind the wheel, had not yet given up. After all, his beloved was now inside his car.

Wherever he took her, she would go. That, at the very least, meant that she had given in a little. Otherwise, she would never have allowed him to pick her up.

"Then let's go to my house. My father is out inspecting construction work in the countryside." The voice dripped like poisoned honey. "Your house has been abandoned for months, full of dust. Let me find someone to clean it before you get back."

Each sugary word turned Bell's stomach. She could barely stand to hear him; just sharing the same air was suffocating her. She chose silence as her response. She neither accepted nor refused... She let him interpret it however he wanted.

And so the path to his home remained open.



If he only knew, Bell had already made her plans before she even left prison.

Now she stood before an imposing mansion, surrounded by high walls in an elite gated community—a 40 million Baht property worthy of a Member of Parliament and ruling party leader.

Wanchaloem, Top's father, had not reached this position by chance.

He had learned to navigate the political tides, bending to the winds of power, switching sides when convenient, even if it earned him the nickname "treacherous snake" from the public. For him, however, profit was worth more than loyalty.

"How do you think I got all this?" he seemed to whisper through the golden walls of the mansion.

Bell entered the colossal mansion where only father and son lived; the maid lived in a tiny house at the back.

She wasn't new here. She had been in this house before. But now, every step echoed with a bitter knowledge: she knew all the crimes those two men had committed against so many others.

"Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil?" A lie. All it took was power and connections to escape karma. While others suffered, they lived in luxury—adored by some, hated by others, but never brought down.

Today, however, Bell was there to settle scores.

"What are you doing?!"



Bell screamed, writhing to escape the disgusting embrace Top had imposed from behind, without warning. Her heart pounded with anger and disgust; it was hard to believe that she had once tolerated, even desired, those same hands.

Top, however, seemed unable to read the revulsion in her.

"I just missed you... Bell, don't you want to hug me?"

He smiled, pretending not to understand, as he always did. His strong arms opened again, and although Bell resisted less this time, her delicate hands still pressed on his broad shoulders, pushing him away. His face, previously frowning with confusion, now tried to disguise despair under a blank expression.

"Go take a shower first. I haven't taken one yet either... Don't you feel dirty?"

It seemed like he understood perfectly the meaning behind those words. Top's eyes never knew how to hide anything... Bell knew exactly what he expected of her. So, she didn't even bother to argue, not wanting to waste time. The son of the owner of the house took her to his room on the second floor, willing to do exactly what Bell had suggested with her carefully chosen words.

"Does Bell want to take a shower first?"

"You go first."

It was difficult for her to pretend, to act as if she were still in a relationship with a weak-willed man like Top, as if they had never had any conflicts, as if she hadn't spent months in prison because of this ex-boyfriend. Bell softened her appearance to almost the point of not seeming like herself, all to fool him. And, for a man like Top, it was incredibly easy to fall for the story.



After all, he was the type who spent his days following his father's orders, using money and influence to solve problems without any shame...

As soon as the homeowner's son disappeared into the bathroom, Bell felt her body tremble violently as fear took hold of her.

If she didn't use soft words when dealing with him, she might end up in danger. The entire plan she had laid out might fall apart, far from what she had expected.

The young woman sneaked out of the room after making sure Top was taking a shower and couldn't intercept her. The huge two-story house was silent and empty, with no one else there besides her and her ex-lover...

Bell arrived in the kitchen, plunged into complete darkness. Her eyes, already adjusted to the dim light, allowed her to identify objects without bumping into furniture. A strong smell of oil filled her nostrils as she spilled it over the counter and onto the floor.

Her trembling hands grabbed Top's phone, which she had snatched, and dialed the same number as before—the same one she had called as soon as she had left prison.

"Lieutenant Krod... There's a fire at Deputy Wanchaloem's house!"

("Is that you, Bell? Whose number is this? Wait—")

The call was abruptly cut off, even before the fire started. But she would never give up on her plan. The lighter in her hands lit a small flame, weak and trembling... but in moments, it would turn into hell.



And it wouldn't just be an ordinary fire. It would be something much bigger, a devastating impact, just as she had planned.

Bell threw the lighter into the puddle of oil on the floor.

Last night, a fire broke out at the residence of MP Wanchaloem Sangkhabut, a member of the Socialist Party's executive committee.

The morning news announcer continued to report the events:

"Emergency crews were able to quickly control the flames, and the damage was restricted to the kitchen area, without spreading to other rooms. No victims were recorded, as the deputy was not at the scene; only his son and a friend were present. The revelation that shocked many is that the friend confessed to being the author of the fire."

As the name of the house owner echoed through the room, Claire's fingers involuntarily tightened around her coffee cup.

"A familiar name..." Claire looked up at the television in the living room, the place where inmates used to relax by watching programs.

"Hey, look! It's Bell!"

Several inmates began to poke each other, pointing at the screen that showed the young woman next to the politician's son. The reporter continued:

"On the left of the screen, you can see Miss Bell Lalita, the arsonist who set fire to the deputy's residence before alerting the police. She confessed that she planned the act to expose certain truths, creating a situation that would force the



police to investigate the scene. We will bring you more details below..."

"The list of illegalities paraded across the screen in an infographic prepared by the news: **Stolen antiquities**—more than 10 historical artifacts from other nations, smuggled into the country; **illegal weapons**—various unauthorized military equipment; a huge shipment of drugs in the back warehouse of the house, ready for export."

"As viewers can see, a month ago, MP Wanchaloem proposed an anti-drug policy." The reporter pointed out the irony: "Ms. Lalita, his son's ex-girlfriend, was the one he vowed to punish severely. But the drugs found appear to belong to Top—his own son, now under investigation as a major drug trafficker..."

In prison, the reactions were electrifying:

"Bell went out to drag that piece of shit Wanchaloem to jail? **OH MY GOD, QUEEN!**" Even the inmates—who normally weren't surprised by anything—were shocked.

As for Wanchaloem's infamous reputation—already detested by the people—every treacherous act he committed in parliament was recorded, accumulating debts that would one day be collected. Claire smiled with pride as she thought of her beloved's courage, defying the corrupt system, facing an oppressive giant alone, and proving that a woman with only her bare hands can overthrow a tyrant.

"Let everyone know: even the powerful can fall... especially at the hands of a determined woman."



"We meet again, but in very different positions this time." Jet, the Sangkhabut family's lawyer, spoke in a soft, calculating voice. He was there to represent the defense—ironically, against Wanchaloem, who was now suing Bell for arson and property damage.

When he mentioned "different positions," it was a bitter echo of the past, before he had pressured her to confess to drug possession. Now, under the guise of defense, he was actually cornering her to receive the maximum sentence.

The hypocrisy was nauseating.

After all, Wanchaloem had barely escaped a vote of no confidence in parliament, following the discovery of illegal artifacts in his possession and new evidence of corruption piling up as debts soon came due.

Despite the majority of members of parliament voting for his removal from office, he still had the audacity to prosecute the young woman who set the fire to expose his crimes. Wanchaloem's obsession was evident.

Even though he was sentenced to what practically amounted to life imprisonment and abandoned by the powerful allies who had previously supported him, he was also betrayed by the corrupt generals who were now digging into his past to distance themselves.

And yet, he clung to revenge—determined to drag her back to jail, as if that could save what was left of his dignity.

"Aren't you still stunned enough by the plea for a reduced sentence from those two, father and son?" Bell let out a sharp jab, watching the lawyer's expressionless smile intently.



She knew Top was facing nearly ten years in prison for large-scale trafficking, since the police had traced the drug ring back to him. The sentence, although half that of his father, was still long enough to give him a taste of his own medicine.

"I have just two questions for you."

"If I can answer, I will." Bell's voice no longer held the same pleading tone as before. She crossed her arms, studying the man's behavior.

Strange lawyer, so different from all their previous encounters.

"You are Mrs. Chutima's daughter, aren't you?"

Bell frowned at the completely unrelated question.

Lawyer Jet had mentioned the real name of her mother, Chutima, who had died nearly a decade ago. Instead of charging documents, he had pulled out files from a case involving a car accident with a drunk politician.

"Professor Chutima was my advisor in law school. She died in a car accident, and her daughter was seriously injured... Am I correct?"

He reconstructed the facts with surgical precision. Bell looked up at him. It was true: her mother had been a renowned jurist. But she had never imagined that one of her former students would appear before her like this, years later.

"I investigated this case in secret." Lawyer Jet leaned forward, his voice low but full of conviction. "There is evidence that the secretary who was arrested was not the driver that night. The seatbelt marks are definitive proof. And yes... I always knew it was him. Your mother—my teacher—



died because Wanchaloem was drunk at the wheel. Only now have I got the final confirmation from the police... through her boyfriend in prison."

Bell felt the air leave her lungs. She knew exactly who Jet was referring to—the former secretary, the scapegoat who had served time in place of the real culprit. Her fellow prisoner—who had risked her own safety to get the truth.

The lawyer allowed her to read each document before methodically filing them away in the file cabinet. The irony was sharp: the same man who had relentlessly pursued her, who had dedicated his career to defending corrupt politicians, was now proving to be her unlikely ally.

"Are you willing to settle that score from ten years ago?"

"When you set fire to the house, you made sure to call the police," Lawyer Jet spoke in the same unflappable voice he used in court.

The one who had never lost a case. "Lieutenant Krod can confirm: if she had really wanted to destroy property, she would not have alerted the authorities in time. Furthermore, her actions exposed Wanchaloem's crimes. The court will certainly acquit her."

He then leaned forward, delivering his final card:

"And here's my professional advice: you can sue Top for moral damages—for having wrongfully put you in prison before. The compensation would be enough for you to start your life over."

One year later...



In front of the imposing white wall of the Women's Penal Institute—the place where Bell had lived part of her story—she waited. This time, not to visit, but to receive her beloved.

The iron gates opened with a solemn creak, revealing a slender figure advancing with firm steps. In her arms, Claire carried a vase with a flowering rose bush, just as she had promised on each visit:

"When I leave, I'll bring the whole garden to you."

The red petals fluttered in the wind, staining the gray of the prison with color. Bell smiled. Life was finally beginning for real.

Claire gave her a radiant smile as she approached, the bouquet of roses symbolizing not just love, but an entire future the two of them had cultivated together—vibrant as the garden they had dreamed of creating since the first day they joined hands in the prison yard.

"Did you wait long for me?"

Bell shook her head, her face lit with an expression that needed no words. Finally, the days of waiting were over.

"Now it's our turn to live the dream we planted."



Final Chapter

"Guys, check out this Korean barbecue buffet that's all over Twitter! Everyone's saying the meat is premium, the sauce is divine, and best of all: the price is unbeatable! For less than 300 Baht per person, you can eat as much as you want—beef, pork, and chicken—and it even includes dessert! It's worth every penny!"

The influencer rotated her phone attached to her tripod, capturing crowded tables even on a weekday, with customers lining up at the buffet to get their hands on premium cuts. Individual grills steamed with fresh meat, and agile staff constantly replenished plates.

The video ended with her hugging a bowl of free ice cream: "So, are you planning to come over today?"

#Foodie #KoreanBarbecue #UnmissablePromotion"

"The restaurant is almost never empty—no table is left unoccupied for more than a minute. For those who have doubts about the place's hiring policy, rest assured: the owner herself confirmed that if an employee has a criminal record, they are only placed behind the scenes (kitchen, stock, etc.). Customer service is reserved only for those who have passed a rigorous screening."

But the restaurant doesn't just stand out for the quality of its food; it also earns trust through the way it treats its staff.

All because, as soon as this Korean spice went viral on Twitter overnight, 'well-intentioned' people appeared to give 'warnings'...



Or rather, to make malicious criticisms. With harsh and unconstructive words, they even insinuated: "Be careful! The staff is all made up of ex-convicts. One of these days, you're going to be robbed in the middle of your meal!"

The restaurant has word-of-mouth reviews and recommendations among its customers. Some even fall in love with the place and return many times, bringing friends to eat together, without caring about the malicious comments or gossip from people who only want to harm others.

Not to mention what the young owner of the restaurant had already said on this subject:

"As for our employees who we hire even with a past record, I believe they have already served their sentences according to the law. But, the day they are released, no place will accept them to work because of their background. I see it like this: if society does not give them a chance... there is a high possibility that they will commit the same crimes again. Instead of helping to reduce crime rates, we end up leaving these people with no alternatives, pushing them back down the wrong path."

Many were impressed by her story and began researching her past. They discovered that her name was Bell Lalita and that she had been sent to prison for drug possession. But in reality, she was framed by her ex-boyfriend. Later, she was the one who helped the police expose the crimes of her ex and his father, a corrupt politician. To this day, both of them are paying for their crimes behind bars.

Meanwhile, she had the opportunity to start over, fulfilling her dream of opening her own restaurant. And she has been in a relationship that will celebrate its third anniversary in a few days.



"My girlfriend? Oh, yes... We met in prison. We're already engaged," she said, lifting her left hand to reveal a delicate silver ring on her ring finger, her pretty face lighting up with a radiant smile. "We're waiting for marriage equality. We plan to register our union first and then have a small celebration, just for family and close friends."

"Claire, what are you doing there? Come here, let me do it!" said the tall, skinny young man, gesturing energetically to stop the other person from taking the bronze barbecue to the customers' table.

On busy days when the restaurant was overwhelmed and the staff couldn't keep up, Claire, the owner, would often come down to help the younger employees. She wasn't very skilled in other areas—especially when it came to financial calculations, accounting, and balance sheets. For those things, it was best to leave them in Bell's capable hands.

"I'm trying to help you here, you blockhead!" Claire replied, a hint of playfulness in her voice.

"No need to help, no! If Bell catches me making you work, she'll kill me! Come on, sit down!" The young clerk, almost half Claire's age, wasn't afraid to push her away with his hands.

Claire wasn't the type to play the bossy boss. Her stern face was just a facade; in reality, she lived joking with the younger employees as if they were schoolmates. But that didn't mean no one respected her. Everyone knew the right time to be professional.

As Claire walked around the restaurant, checking to see if customers needed anything, she noticed that the staff was impeccable, each one fulfilling their role without fail.



Claire & Bell Korean BBQ was originally a small buffet restaurant, but over time, it had expanded. The first few months were tough, but after gaining fame on social media, loyal customers kept coming back, and new ones were attracted by the good reviews. In less than two years, the place had already become a success.

"Auntie Claire! Auntie Claire!"

A high-pitched, excited voice made Claire turn toward the table where the call had come from. A high school girl was waving frantically, surrounded by a group of friends... five, six, seven... it seemed like she had brought the whole class.

Claire approached the frequent customer with a wide smile on her face—so radiant it was almost blinding.

The teenager clasped her hands together in a respectful "wai" as she introduced Claire to her friends:

"This is Aunt Claire, my mother's friend!" the girl said, speaking excitedly without letting go of the chopsticks she was holding deftly. It was Nong Prae, the daughter of the late Aunt Phon. "I brought my friends to celebrate after the midterms!"

"Make yourself at home! For Prae's friends, today is half price! And for you, my dear, it's on me!"

The student table erupted in cheers, with so many chopsticks being raised that they seemed to float. Everyone clasped their hands in thanks, in such an enthusiastic "wai" that Claire could barely reciprocate it to everyone.



Since their release from prison, Claire and Bell had made a point of visiting their late Aunt Phon's family regularly, creating a special bond with Prae—a bright, intelligent young woman. Deep down, Claire hoped that Phon, wherever she was, could see that her daughter was becoming exactly the wonderful person she always said she would be.

After making sure everything in the restaurant was in order, Claire headed to the back, straight to the office next to the employee break area. The space had a dining table, sofa, and refrigerator for those who wanted to bring something beyond the restaurant's endless free options.

With a polite knock on the door, Claire entered to find her love, as always, immersed in the financial calculations that underpinned their shared dream.

At the same time, Bell was engrossed in a video on her favorite YouTube channel. The presenter's familiar, animated voice echoed through the office:

"Did you know that, in addition to covering the animals' food, income from tourism also helps with veterinary treatments and the maintenance of more than 40 square meters of preserved area...?"

On the computer screen, Natty, her younger sister, appeared. The young woman, who had previously been preparing for college entrance exams, had followed her dream of becoming a digital influencer. Now, she was traveling to more than ten provinces in Thailand, documenting her adventures.

In the tourism industry, Natty had the support of her boyfriend, a young man she had known since high school and who now accompanied her on all her trips, filming every step of the journey.



Just like her older sister, Natty had achieved impressive success: her channel surpassed one million subscribers in just one year. Since leaving the juvenile detention center, the slender and full-bodied girl had matured rapidly, accumulating life experiences as intense as those of her sister.

Sometimes their mother would appear in Natty's videos or visit Claire at the Korean barbecue restaurant. These moments became opportunities for reconciliation.

Claire never held a grudge against her mother for what had happened in the past. On the contrary, she felt relieved that they had become closer again.

Meanwhile, Claire sneaked up to her girlfriend's desk, resting her hands on the surface to see how long Bell would remain mesmerized by the video. Only when Bell noticed her presence did she pause the content, turning around with an embarrassed smile as if apologizing for procrastinating.

"Wait a minute..."

"You haven't even seen Natty's latest video yet, have you? Oh, but of course, you already said it—"

"Why don't we watch it together? Or would you rather wait until tonight?"

"You can watch it first. Then we can watch it again together." Claire smiled, coming around the table to place a kiss on Bell's light brown hair. Meanwhile, Bell buried her nose in her girlfriend's arm, breathing in the scent that permeated her shirt—a mix of barbecue smoke, light sweat, and something so characteristically Claire that it had already become her favorite scent.



At that moment, she remembered how she had gotten used to—no, how she had fallen in love with—those little habits. From the smells of the restaurant to everyday gestures... All she needed was to continue living by that person's side.

"Hey, when I get out of prison in two years, do you think Bell's restaurant would hire me?" Didi asked without thinking, causing her two older sisters to turn to her with irritated looks.

For Didi, that age would be perfect to start facing the outside world, looking for opportunities and sending out resumes. But to expect to be hired by an establishment whose owners were her former victims? After all the harm she had done to them, how could she even consider that possibility? Where in her mind had that absurd idea come from?!